

BARB BOYS

OR

**THE ... YOUNG
COW-PUNCHERS**



EDWIN L. SABIN

To, Carl Marquitz

From Ted Drew



BOOKS BY
EDWIN L. SABIN

"OLD" JIM BRIDGER ON THE MOCCASIN
TRAIL
PLUCK ON THE LONG TRAIL; OR, BOY
SCOUTS IN THE ROCKIES

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PEAKS
TREASURE MOUNTAIN; OR, THE YOUNG
PROSPECTORS
SCARFACE RANCH; OR, THE YOUNG HOME-
STEADERS

THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY
NEW YORK



ALMOST SIDE BY SIDE GRAY JACK AND THE BANDED
STEER RACED ALONG.

Bar $\bar{B}$ Boys

OR

The Young Cow-Punchers

BY

EDWIN L. SABIN

Lift yore tails an' roll 'em high,
You'll be a cowboy by an' by.

Old Song.

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CHAPTER CORRAL

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. PHIL STEPS OFF	I
II. PHIL RUNS FOR HIS LIFE	10
III. PHIL JOINS THE UTES	19
IV. PHIL JOINS THE COWBOYS	29
V. AT THE BAR B RANCH	37
VI. PHIL RIDES THE RANGE	51
VII. PHIL HOLDS THE LITTLE RED BULL	60
VIII. PHIL IS LOST AGAIN	68
IX. THE CAMP IN THE ARROYO	77
X. OLD JESS INSTRUCTS	88
XI. PHIL ROPES THE BANDED STEER	102
XII. COWMAN SIMMS MEETS THE MAN WITH THE LIMP	114
XIII. PHIL RECEIVES HIS "STRING"	130
XIV. THE MAN WITH THE FROZEN SMILE, AGAIN	139
XV. THE ROUNDUP CAMP	147
XVI. PHIL UPHOLDS THE HONOR OF THE BAR B	158
XVII. THE BIG CIRCLE	166
XVIII. THE SIGNS IN THE ARROYO	178
XIX. THE BRANDING OF THE BIG MAVERICK	187

CHAPTER CORRAL

CHAPTER	PAGE
XX. PHIL PROVES HIMSELF	195
XXI. PHIL MEETS THE ENEMY AND IS THEIRS	211
XXII. THE LAST OF THE MAN WITH THE FROZEN SMILE	220
XXIII. MISTRESS CHERRY JOINS THE CAMP	237
XXIV. THE BRANDING OF THE CALVES . .	252
XXV. NO WOOLLIES ALLOWED	266
XXVI. MISTRESS CHERRY TO THE RESCUE .	283
XXVII. PEPPER SEEKS THE WILD BUNCH . .	303
XXVIII. THE WILD-HORSE CAMP	315
XXIX. MORE RUSTLER SIGNS—AND BEARS .	331
XXX. SOMETHING HAPPENS TO CHERRY . .	347
XXXI. PHIL REGAINS HIS WATCH	358
XXXII. ADIOS	374

PERSONAGE ROUNDUP

PHIL—Who is the Amateur on the Range

CHET—Who is a Regular Professional

CHERRY—Who Also is a Professional, for a Girl

MR. SIMMS—Who is Chet's Father, a Rancher and a Cowman

OLD JESS—Who has been Punching Cattle Forty Years

HANEY—Who is a Red-Headed Cowboy from Texas

BUSTER—Who Never has been Out of the Hills

FORD—Who is a Cowboy from Harvard; likewise Boston

HOMBRE—Who is a Mexican Christened Manuel but Never
Called So

PETE—Who is the Roundup Cook.

TOM—Who is the Bar B Cat

"BOYS" from the Lazy J, the Open A, the Reverse R, the
Flying U, the Triangle Cross, the Three I, the Boot

CAPTAIN BILLY, Ute Chief; Charley Pow-wow, and Other
"Good" Indians

HORSES—Pepper, Medicine Eye, Grey Jack, Doc, Bow Legs,
Rover, Sam, Sukie, Nig, Hump, Lonesome, Ring, Old
Squaw, Ute, Monte and Seventy More

THE BANDED STEER

THE MAN WITH ONE EYE, the Man with the Limp, the Man
with the Frozen Smile, Seen by Phil first in the Box Cañon

BAR B RANCH AND RANGE

Seventy-five Miles from a Railroad, in the Rocky Mountains

BAR B BOYS

CHAPTER I

PHIL STEPS OFF

THE passenger train was laboriously puffing, with two engines, up one of those four per cent. grades not uncommon in Rocky Mountain railroading. The ascent was being made by a series of undulating, snaky curves. Upon the back platform of the rear coach stood Phil Macowan, enjoying himself. There was a novelty in the situation, and this was his first experience of the West. However, he soon was to have experiences in plenty.

The train was almost at the top of the divide. A massy rolling carpet of somber dark green patterned here and there in emerald, below stretched league after league of pine and spruce interspersed with occasional patches of lighter quaking aspen.

Around-about, above the timber and much higher than the train, although not all appearing so, between the green of forest and the blue of sky, were outlined snowy crests, and naked granite ranges seamed and blotched with white; and had Phil been enabled to see ahead over his own hill he would have descried the mountains of Utah, one hundred miles and more westward.

Far on the north the heavy timber area ended and

was succeeded by a country of mesas, or table-lands: curious flattened formations with abrupt sides and well-defined rims like walls. This mesa country looked regular and bare; but more intimate knowledge of it was to acquaint Phil with its sheer ruggedness and its ample covering of sage and grease-wood, cedar and piñon. Now miles distant, in the clear air it lay apparently plain to the eye, nevertheless just enough softened by bluish haze to make it mysterious and romantic.

Comfortably braced upon the lowest step of the open-platform car Phil rode and thrilled. For no sound was to be heard, save the exhaust of the two engines. In that broad expanse of earth and sky stirred no living thing save a striped gopher scampering among the rocks and the twin hawks floating like sentries above a wooded vale below. It was a world waiting to be explored; and at intervals touching the ground with his toe Phil keenly wished that instead of being bound, even alone, for California, to recuperate after his pneumonia, he might stop off right here and begin adventuring.

The hour was about noon. The season was May; but the sun was warm, the air was motionless and balmy, and at this 9,000 feet elevation, where the remnants of snow were still scattered, there was no chilliness. The train (which repeatedly boxed the compass) was traversing a south slope, open and mellow, where last year's grasses were tall and feathery, bushes were bursting into bloom, and the bright scarlet flowers called Indian Paint Brushes were al-

ready making gay show. Phil extended farther his truant foot. Crouched, he dared to drag it. The train was merely crawling; and swinging down and out he disembarked entirely, to run along holding to the step rail. In bravado he dared to dismiss that also, and to trot behind.

Urged by his spirit of adventure he darted aside, and grabbed a flower as a trophy; and another; he had time, with this slow-coach of a train—and he veered still farther from the track to gather in a paint brush, the giant of all. This gave the train a little head-start; and when he had tugged the stem loose an increasing staccato clankety-clankety warned him that he had better sprint aboard.

For a few paces he ran laughingly—then on a sudden he indeed put his best foot forward; evidently the train had struck a bit of down-grade; with clankety-clankety-clankety the wheels were rolling faster and ever 'faster. He gained only gradually. He snatched off his hat and spurted in earnest. Clankety-clankety-clankety-clankety, sped the wheels.

Phil was no slouch at running, but this was a race 9,000 feet in the air—a mile and a half higher than he was accustomed to. Besides, he had had pneumonia. His lungs were bursting, his legs wobbled, he slipped on a piece of ice and staggered sprawling; and when, with his trousers torn across the knees and his hands bleeding, he lurched to his feet the rear car of the train was just being swallowed by a cut, fifty yards ahead.

“Toot, toot!” called back the engines, in derision.

Phil quit; he could run no more. But only for an instant he stood, appalled. He must head her off; on an up-grade he could catch her. He toiled to the top of the bank. There was the track again, a hundred yards on his right and apparently a fraction up the hill. Scrambling, hurrying, desperate, he made for it. He beat the train, and he sat down, panting, to wait.

A most convenient arrangement of trackage was this—where a fellow could drop off and pick flowers, and strike across and get aboard again. He must chuckle as he fancied how astonished the brakeman would be to have him flag the train with his hat; to see him in front when he had thought him behind!

He was well rested, and yet the train had not come back. He grew uneasy and arose to his feet. Much higher on the slope, and beyond, smoke floated above another cut. There was his train! With a wide circuit about the hill it had emerged—*but he was on a track already passed over!* He was left.

Now forth sprang Phil, running, frantically waving his hat, yelling. But he made no impression upon the train, nor upon the mighty world about; and presently, with a sob of despair and of exhaustion, he threw himself down. Stillness, broken only by his gasps, ensued.

High upon this hillside, in the midst of the strange Rockies, he was alone, an atom as compared with those leagues of timber and rock beneath the limitless sky.

Abruptly he sat up, and dashed his hand across his

wet eyes. He was not in such a bad fix, after all; for here were the rails to follow, and they would lead him out. But should he follow them forward, or back? Fully an hour ago the train had snorted out from the last station, which was merely a box-car and a water-tank; but this was at least a habitation, and how far ahead was the next station he did not know. Therefore, he chose the box-car.

Hopeful and alive again, he took a survey to see which direction was back. The track turned so often that direction was an uncertain quantity. His experience in catching that train by a short-cut had bewildered him! He opened an envelope, which he found in his pocket, and flattened it, and thrusting a stick through it stuck it into the ground like a sign, broadside to the right and left. Then he selected the right-hand way, and trudged off. The track curved, and, having rounded the curve and emerged, Phil, looking back, could distinguish the envelope landmark against the hill-slope above. Consequently, he was descending and on the backward road. But he did not feel assured until another turn took him still farther down. Then, relieved, he set his face to the fore and began to enjoy himself once more.

The thin and crisp but warm air, the glowing sun, the perfect calm, the wondrous blue, the pungent scents, the expanse of earth and sky, the sensation of being alone and dependent upon his own wits, and yet within reach of succor, led him to whistle blithely and step springily. The track, turning upon itself as was its habit, swung past a hundred yards below;

and leaving the portion that he was on he boldly went sliding and scrambling down to it, thus saving time and labor.

The track reappearing below again, in similar manner he short-cut to that place, also—leaving the grassy open, crossing a strip of young aspens, and coming out at the friendly rails.

Such progression from terrace down to terrace, along the great hillside, furnished a fine excitement. Now far below was the track once more, as it swept in a half circle and entered the dense timber. Reckless and elated, down plunged Phil, sliding, striding with long step, ploughing the soft sod with his heels and skipping from boulder to boulder; feeling a veritable woodsman and explorer.

A foaming brook stopped him sharply; but after skirting it for a few rods he made a run and jump, and leaped it, landing in a copse of quaking aspen. Through these, their new leaves a-quiver as if shuddering over some tragedy of wild life, he hastened—only to become entangled amidst old fallen timber, the relic of ancient fire or snow-slide. Now ducking, now climbing, finally he escaped (and glad to do so) into a clearer area of living spruce and pine.

Walking briskly again and constantly anticipating to make exit upon the track, Phil found that the exit was as constantly being postponed. The aisles of reddish trunks standing above the dead strewn needles and the sparse grass and brush stretched endless.

Where was the track, anyway? He should be encountering it. Surely he had gone far enough,

and he had been aiming straight for it. He walked vigorously for ten minutes; then he paused, and peered. But only the thousand trees, and the slight incline, brown and green and dappled with the sun but monotonously unbroken, lay before, behind, on either hand. There was no track nor token of a track. Here, in this solitude, man might never have been.

Standing motionless, heart-sick, Phil listened. An engine whistled, in faint and ghostly fashion. The sound came from quite the opposite direction to that which he might have expected. He turned and hurried for that quarter. The engine whistled again. No, he was heading wrong. He changed his course. The whistle had seemed much nearer. But a third whistle was farther away than ever, and at yet another point of the compass.

Again a sob welled in Phil's throat. He was lost; or, rather, as the Indian would say, the *track* was lost, he was *here*.

The dreadful panic of the lost now seized Phil, and he ran wildly, headlong, to the right, to the left, onward; if the track was not in one direction it must be in another. But he discovered it not. The engine whistled no more for him. It had not waited. He was deserted and left to perish.

And beside himself over his plight, running, trudging, shrieking, halting to gasp and listen but suddenly running again, bruised by branch and trunk, scratched by twig, torn by thorn, Phil roamed hither and thither until with a moan he sank to the earth.

Around-about the forest stretched, as before, with never a sign of human life. He had given up on the edge of a little opening or park, where the grass was matted and deep and where the paint brushes flamed. Across the park was a ledgy outcrop of rock. It seemed to Phil that he heard the trickle of water. This brought him to his feet, and lured him on until, by the ledge, he found a tiny spring dripping through the mossy verdure.

Making a cup of his hands he drank greedily; then he climbed the ledge at one end, wistfully to look about him. But the view was the same, always the same: trees, and trees, and trees, serried, stiff and unfriendly.

The icy water which he had swallowed into an empty stomach, combined with the strain that he was under, caused a sickish sensation. The top of the ledge was sunny and warm. Just for a moment would he lie there, upon his back, his hat over his eyes, in the angle of a log where the grass was long and soft; just for a moment, miserable, to rest.

Far and near, around, the myriad trees breathed musically; subtle scents floated on the almost imperceptible breeze; earth and sky were reveling in spring, thinking good glad thoughts. And Phil, even while wondering what was going to happen to him and what his mother and father would say, drifted away into peace.

He was aroused by voices. Struggling to open his eyes and collect his wits he sat up in alarm. He was

vaguely aware that the day had well waned, for the log was casting a shadow across him and he was cold. He must have been sound asleep. The smell of burning wood was wafted to him; below, under the ledge, men were talking and using many oaths.

CHAPTER II

PHIL RUNS FOR HIS LIFE

"THAT bunch ther' ought to be worth two hundred dollars, flat. They're mostly two-year-olds."

"They'd be worth more if we could hold 'em till the market's up, an' didn't have to turn 'em into beef as fast as we get 'em."

"By thunder, I've a notion to start a nice little herd o' my own. What say, Joe? Want to be a cattle king?" The speaker chuckled. His voice was coarse, his chuckle was coarse, and Phil instinctively shrank closer behind the log.

"Well, if we could raise cattle as easy as we do brands we'd be plumb rich by nex' Christmas. What you goin' to invent out o' that Lazy J sign?"

"Make her over into a Lazy Eight, I reckon."

"How 'bout a PJ——like this?" spoke a third man's voice.

"Good."

"Let's see," asked a girl's voice, timidly.

"You set back there," ordered a man, his voice accompanied by an audible smack as of open hand against face. "Yuh want to see too much."

While the girl cried, in a stifled, convulsive manner (Phil's blood boiled to hear her), the men continued their talking.

"I hate too many o' these letters. We've got a TB out o' them Bar B, yuh know. Willin' to stick to that, fer Bar B caows seem to be the primest we git; but while the PJ is purty an' might burn clean, Lazy Eight strikes me as better."

"Jes' the same, we've a right to the hull alphabet, same as anybody. An' ther' 's nothin' safe, no matter how you fix it; not even hides an' meat. I never feel easy till I've got rid o' the critters, horn, hoof an' tail, an' have the money in my pocket an' am out o' the country."

"That's right. There's nothin' safe. Rustlin' cows or rustlin' kids."

These must be thieves, decided Phil, with quick alarm; cattle thieves, perhaps kidnappers. What should he do? Retreat, or lie still? He scarcely dared to breathe.

During these few moments the sun had withdrawn entirely, and out of the pale twilight was creeping a chill. It was the lonesome hour when day is merging into night; when the creatures of the light hasten homeward, and ere the creatures of the darkness skulk forth. Bacon was sizzling in a pan; the odor tantalized homeless Phil's nostrils. He stirred impulsively. Under the weight of his elbow a branch sharply cracked.

"Sht!" hissed one of the men.

There was an instant of utter silence, while Phil's heart was in his throat.

The men mumbled low and briefly.

"If it is anybody, git him if yuh have to shoot his

head off," said one of the men, with an oath. "Can't nobody listen to *us*."

"Oh, don't hurt him. Please don't," pleaded the girl, in terror.

"Shut up!" was the growling response.

Phil instantly was frigid with horror. They were about to search for *him*! Paralyzed with the thought, as in a nightmare, he was unable to move. Then a step among the twigs of the slope, adown the ledge, on his right, electrified him into action; and like a deer from its covert he bounced all at once to his feet and bolted for the left.

"Hey! Halt, you!"

Wh! Bang! First the bullet (it seemed to cut just behind his head), and closely following, the report.

A hearty curse, and—thut! Bang! Phil was tearing through a sprinkle of cedars and the ball buried itself in wood right by his ear!

Again, and dried needles and dirt (Bang!) flew in a spurt so immediately before him that at the same second his toe was set into the gash!

But he had crossed the cedared little ridge of which the ledge was only a continuation, and in momentary protection was descending the farther side. The trees were thicker. Desperately he dodged among them, to bury himself from those ruthless pursuers. Hoarse voices, threatening, angry, shouted and answered behind him. Through the dusky, looming timber he scurried with the terror of any hunted dumb brute, until, legs and lungs "all in," as if seek-

ing a hole he dived with one last effort amidst the dense low branches of a spruce. Here, in an open circular space around the trunk, concealed very cleverly by the branches' tips which swept about, touching the ground, he cowered, waiting.

He heard footsteps—a rapid but somewhat irregular pace upon the forest carpeting of needles; and he cowered more snugly still, while in annoying fashion thumpety, thumpety, thumpety resounded his heart. The steps came nearer, paused, went by; and peering out through a peep-hole of the spruce fronds Phil saw, traversing a twilight spot, a man—a lame man, with a long-barreled revolver alertly poised in his left hand. Limping on short leg, with a stealthy quickness and a gazing right and left, he passed out of sight. The dimness of the forest swallowed him.

Phil remained close in hiding. In the distance, whence the lame man had disappeared, he heard next a cautious “coo-ee,” as a signal. And soon from one side the lame man and another man carrying a shot-gun or rifle returned, murmuring together.

“Light was so bad, or I’d a got him,” was saying the lame man, as they actually brushed the spruce within whose circle Phil was crouching. “Only a kid, but he has ears an’ a tongue. He’s a legal witness.”

“Kin make trouble, all right,” agreed the other.

And they proceeded on.

The dusk swiftly deepened to darkness. Phil stayed beneath his spruce. Cramped with hunger and cold tho’ he was, miserable, scarcely venturing

to change position, this was his only haven. A wind started up, and the vast lonely reaches of forest sighed dismally. An owl hooted. Afar something screamed like an enraged cat. Under the spruce, and around, were little rustlings as amidst the dead needles the wood mice played and foraged. Presently, while Phil, straining his ears, listened for each fresh noise of the night, without the spruce sounded a scratchy patter, patter. It halted; the branches beside Phil moved. Some animal was seeking entrance.

"Get out!" repulsed Phil, as loudly as he dared, in a spasm of fear.

The animal retreated, patter, patter. Hastily and stiffly straightening, bumping his head and scratching his face, Phil forced a way upward among the thick boughs; and six or eight feet off the ground cowered anew.

The wind punished him, but he felt safer. The pattering along the ground persisted. The animal was busily ambulating hither and thither. Phil stared, but could not see it. He heard a rasping, as of teeth against bark. The animal was gnawing; if it ate wood it hardly would eat boy, and he was reassured.

His eyelids drooped, and closed. He tried to impress upon himself that even if he went to sleep he must hold fast to the spruce trunk. At a sudden scuffle, below—a growl, a jump, a whine—his eyes flew open again. The whining continued, like that of a dog greedy or disappointed. Two pale phosphorescent eyes looked up, through the darkness, at

Phil looking down; the whine changed to a snarly growl, and with soft, lithe pit, pit, pit the beast trotted away.

After an interval the patter, patter was resumed; and it, also, withdrew.

Phil concluded that this was a porcupine, and that a wolf or coyote (of which he had read) had pounced upon it and been met by its quills.

Shuddering with the cold and the hunger and the fears brought by strange noises he nevertheless went to sleep, dozing uneasily and always hearing things and seeing things. He was awakened by finding himself with a thump upon the ground, outside the tree. Terrified and confused he staggered to his feet; in the darkness he groped for his eyrie again. Fumbling about him, once more he wormed his way among branches, until it seemed to him that he was far enough. He must sleep.

When he opened his eyes next 'twas to the great relief of dawn. The haunted blackness had given place to all-revealing grayness. Where was he, anyway? Was this the berth in the sleeper—or Salt Lake—or what? How stiff and chilled he was! He moved painfully, releasing a leg; and then, in a flash, all recurred to him. He had left the train—the train had left *him*—he was alone in the forest—he had lost the railroad track—men had chased him and shot at him—he had climbed this tree because of animals pattering about in the dark—he—but, hold on! He was *not* in a tree! He was upon solid ground! He felt of the ground, wondering. It was there; and

these twigs? They were the twigs of a bush, in the center of which he was sitting. Now he recalled: he had fallen out of the tree, and thinking that he was climbing back into it he must have crawled into this bush! And here he had spent the night, and nothing had molested him, after all!

What time was it? He believed that he had forgotten to wind his watch, but—oh, thunder; his watch was gone! His vest pocket was empty, and only a short fragment of chain hung from the button-hole. During his wild flight some twig had snatched his watch from him. That was a bitter accident—to have lost the little gold watch given him by his mother and father. For an instant tears rushed to his eyes; but he held them back. There was no use in crying over spilled milk. He could not retrace his steps and find the watch.

His hat, also, was gone. Possibly *it* was in the tree. He listened, wary of those ruffian men, those bandits and cattle-thieves. Now was his opportunity to escape, before they were up; and cautiously emerging from his bush he sought for the spruce. There it was, with the hat nicely balanced among the branches. Hastily he seized the hat, and set off, guessing at direction.

His numerous wounds of scratches, cuts and bruises were sore; he hobbled; he was stiff and hungry. He could scarcely realize that it was himself, Phil Macowan, who was this castaway. Phil Macowan should be in a comfortable bed, and about to get up to a civilized breakfast; Phil Macowan presumably

was warm and clean and at peace. But this wretched fugitive, trudging forlornly through the gray, frosty woods of early morn, dinnerless, supperless and breakfastless, his night's lodging a bush and no succor in sight—who was he?

In a patch of frost-rimmed brush something large moved; he stopped short, alarmed. A cow, her calf lying upon its four legs beside her, raised her head and surveyed him. She lowered her head and shook her horns belligerently, with a snort. As Phil sadly circuited her (so far, in the forest, the only friendly things had been the spruce tree and the bush) he saw that there was a big B, with a straight mark above it, upon her hip. In the brush stirred other forms, which proved to be more cattle—some with the big B and straight mark, some with a capital J printed lying on its back, so to speak, upon their sides.

Phil knew. It came upon him with a shock—these were the stolen cattle. And as if to emphasize the fact and the danger, he witnessed, chancing to glance aside, beyond in the timber, where the first rays of the sun were penetrating aslant, a man on horseback riding slowly among the trees. Again Phil knew. This was the lame man.

Instantly sinking low in the brush, stooping, Phil retreated until he struck a little gully; down this he fled, quickening his pace and every moment expecting to be assailed with shout and bullet. The gully deepened to a gulch, with rocky bottom and sparsely timbered slopes; now cold and dark, now warmer where

the sun was reaching. Breathless, Phil slackened to a walk.

The gulch gathered water, at first in the shape of frozen puddles held among the boulders, next as a casual stream gradually increasing.

His feet blistered, his head strangely light, Phil halted; and with difficulty squatting scooped water from a pool, to drink it and to lave his face.

He was trying to summon strength and courage to stand again, when from behind and near at hand a voice spoke, evenly:

"Hello."

Phil's heart skipped a beat. He turned his head quickly. An Indian, in buckskin shirt, leggins and moccasins, a rifle in the hollow of his arm, stood within a few feet, looking at him.

Phil stared. From white outlaws to Indian! What a life he was having!

"What you doing?" asked the Indian in plain English.

"Getting a drink," stammered Phil.

He would have straightened to his feet; but Indian, trees, rocks swam and wavered before him, and weakly he toppled over upon his side.

CHAPTER III

PHIL JOINS THE UTES

WHEN Phil regained consciousness he found himself upon a pallet of blankets, underneath dirty, sloping canvas. The place was circular, and although where the canvas came to a peak, in the center, a hole was open, as if for ventilation, it (the place) did not smell extra sweet.

As he lay on his back, gazing languidly and collecting his thoughts, somebody entered through the doorway. A squaw in soiled draggled calico squatted beside him, and grinning in wide and toothless, but friendly fashion, extended a bowl which steamed.

"Good," she said. "Good——"

The interior atmosphere was, as said, not very sweet; the old squaw was decidedly not sweet; but the steam from the bowl was the sweetest thing that Phil had encountered in all his life—so rich, so fragrant, so appealing it was, so perfect to his famished palate. And with his two trembly hands eagerly grasping the vessel he sucked, regardless of table etiquette, at the contents.

"Ah!" He felt new life coursing through his veins. Dog, rat, deer, bear, whatever it was he did not care; that broth *was good*.

"More," he gasped.

The old squaw took the bowl and shuffled out with it.

"No. Mebbe un hora" (an hour), she delivered, over her shoulder. "No now. Makee malo" (sick).

Phil lay back in blissful peace, the fluid warm within him. His captors might be playing the part of host simply to keep him strong for the torture, but at least he had the broth!

A voice spoke briefly without, asking a question, and was answered. Another figure entered the tepee tent, to halt beside Phil's couch. Staring up, Phil recognized the Indian who had come upon him in the gulch.

"Feeling better?" inquired the Indian, with a smile, showing sound white teeth. He was a young man, with broad swart face.

"Yes. Had something to eat. What'd I do—faint?" responded Phil, now more courageous, and smiling back.

"Yes. Want to get up? We're going."

Phil scrambled to his feet, and stood unsteadily. But in a moment he was quite strong. The broth had helped him wonderfully.

"Come out," bade the Indian.

Phil followed him into the open air and across a grassy little flat formed by the juncture of two gulches. The flat was occupied by a score of Indians old and young, their horses, dogs and camp belongings. Fires smouldered, where tepees had been located; but the camp already was broken. Squaws, busy with packing and lashing, glanced at Phil

askance as he passed; lounging bucks looked upon him stolidly; dogs growled, and children dodged before him or ran after, hooting gleefully. As comported a prisoner, Phil endeavored to bear himself with no sign of emotion—for this, as all know who have read Indian stories, is the proper way.

Phil's guide, who had proceeded silently, with straight, free stride, rifle in hollow of left arm, halted before an old Indian sitting upon his hams upon the ground and smoking a short black pipe. In one hand he held the rope of his pony. He had on a dusty, stained black slouch hat, with a feather stuck through the crown, and wore a grimy calico shirt, equally grimy trousers, and moccasins. A well-filled cartridge-belt was around his waist. He was enormously fat, and his countenance was large, flabby, and almost as dark as any negro's. But despite its flabbiness, about it was a certain dignity mingled with cunning; and the mouth was a thin firm line.

The young man addressed him; they spoke together gutturally but not unmusically.

"This is my father. He is chief," explained the younger Indian, to Phil.

Without moving otherwise the chief proffered his hand.

"How do?" he said, "Wueno. Muncho amigo, hey?"

Phil shook hands.

"He doesn't speak English," explained further the young Indian. "He says you can come along with us and we'll leave you somewhere."

"All right," assented Phil, his scalp tighter upon his head. Of course they might mean to leave him somewhere *dead*, but he would make the best that he could out of the words.

"I'll get you a horse." And laying his rifle by the chief the younger Indian strode off.

The chief grinned up at Phil, and spoke to some length. Phil shook his head.

"Can't understand," he informed.

The chief spoke some more, and gestured. Phil interpreted the motion, and with a polite "Thank you," sat down.

The chief, as if doing the honors, murmured and gurgled and grunted in his strange language—he seemed very good-natured and loquacious for an Indian—and the younger man, his son, arriving leading along a buckskin pony, listened respectfully.

"He says to rub bear's fat on your hurts. I'll give you some. You can ride this horse. It'll follow."

The chief now, with a wheezy grunt, stood—a well-paunched, heavy figure, straddle-kneed. Lifting his voice he shouted a signal. Instantly the camp was in an uproar—squaws screeching, children screaming, dogs barking; and in the midst of it the chief with dignity waddling to his pony, swung on.

"We go now," acquainted the younger Indian.

Phil clambered aboard his bareback buckskin, whose bridle was a single rawhide thong looped about the lower jaw. The old chief, without a glance behind, rode away at a walk. Phil's pony followed, as

a matter of course. Looking behind him Phil saw that the tepee which had sheltered him had vanished, and that the whole camp was stringing out and falling into line. The young man who had been his counselor came galloping up and stopped beside him, to ride gravely, without a word. He carried his rifle across his lap, at the pommel of his saddle; the chief's rifle was in a scabbard, beneath the chief's leg.

The route ascended the northward opening gulch, through pleasant sage and quaking aspen, and soon obliques up the gulch's side. Here at the top lay spread before a long expanse of level sage with now and then a low piñon or cedar. Straight across it jogged the old chief. Evidently he knew where he was going. But trail there was none.

The sun was hot; the motion of the pony although easy was constant; the effect of the broth was wearing off, and all in all the combination made Phil dizzy. The Indian beside him stopped abruptly, and waited while the cavalcade passed. In a minute he galloped up again and handed Phil a canteen.

"Drink," he bade.

Phil gladly obeyed. The tepid water gurgled down his throat.

"Thanks," he gasped.

"Eat. Chew it well, though," bade the Indian, next.

Phil accepted what resembled strips of dirty leather, and rather dubiously examined them. He did not wish to give offense, but——

"Dried beef. Not store dried beef, but what we call jerked beef. It's all right," assured the Indian.

Phil, chewing faithfully upon an end, found it saltless but not unpalatable. He began to feel better.

On and on and on jogged the fat old chief, glancing scarcely to right nor left, much less behind. He seemed perfectly indifferent to the condition of his charges, who might follow or fall out. Across the sagy, hot plateau the course dropped into a draw rimmed by cedars. The bottom of the draw was traversed by a cattle trail, and Phil was congratulating himself that they were approaching white habitation when the old chief turned off the trail and climbed the farther slope, to enter another stretch of plateau covered with the eternal sage under the cloudless blue.

On and on and on jogged the chief, never hesitating nor looking about. On and on followed the cavalcade, ever northward and westward, through draw after draw and across flat after flat, deeper into the wilds. And Phil's heart sank. Was he never to get a word to his mother and father? Were these Indians never to halt to lunch and rest? Was he wearing the pony's back as badly as the pony's back was wearing him? He hoped not.

They were threading a draw wide and sagy and sun-drenched and dry when suddenly the old chief with a grunt changed direction and kicking his pony in the ribs with both heels broke at a trot for the right-hand slope. At a trot followed the cavalcade all. Phil, bounced uncomfortably upon the buckskin's

slippery back, and hanging for security to the long mane, was astonished and annoyed.

Then quite by accident he descried two figures—horsemen—far off and just commencing the descent of the left-hand slope. Evidently the old chief was trying to avoid them.

Up the right-hand flank pressed the chief, urging his laboring pony through brush and scrub-oak, regardless; up the right-hand flank pressed all; and now they went streaming through the close cedars on top, the chief's heels beating an incessant tattoo upon his pony's sides, his elbows flapping, his whole mien betokening a desire for speed.

Carried along, willy-nilly, hanging for dear life to the buckskin's mane and constantly ducking to dodge branches, jolted almost out of his seven senses, Phil had no time to question or protest. But the old chief certainly was running away with him.

They left the cedars behind and proceeded at the rapid excruciating trot across a flowery park.

Now more frantically beat the old chief's moccasined heels, and more wildly flopped his elbows. Phil looked for the fresh occasion. From the timber at one side two horsemen had again appeared, and at a gallop were sweeping obliquely through the park, to intercept them. The old chief's heels and elbows worked in vain, for the intruders converged upon him rapidly; and just at the edge of the park, with jingle of spurs and of bridle and rasp of leather, cut in ahead, to halt.

Venting a single grunt of disgust and resignation,

the fat chief reined his pony abruptly, and halted, too. The cavalcade halted.

They were cowboys, these two. One, in shaggy white leggings (or chaps) reaching to the hip and checked blue jumper, was no older than Phil. The other might have been the father. He wore chaps of plain leather, and was in vest and shirt-sleeves. Their horses were wet and heaving, and they themselves, particularly the man, looked angry.

"Hello, Billy. What's your hurry?" addressed the man.

"H'lo," grunted the chief.

He shook hands with the two. His pony fell to cropping grass.

"Hello, Charley."

The two and Phil's Indian shook hands. They surveyed Phil—the boy roundly, the man keenly out of lean brown face and steady blue eyes weathered about with a mesh of wrinkles. His chin was square, his cheek-bones high, his nose a bit aquiline, his graying mustache heavy and long and balanced by a small stiff goatee. Altogether he appeared to Phil as a personage of experience and decision, who could hold his own.

"Going far?"

"Uintah," responded the Charley Indian, stolidly.

The old chief spoke in Indian, impatiently, and jerked up his pony's head as if to start.

"Good-by," said Charley. "You must excuse us. We're in a hurry."

"Wait a minute. I see you are," protested the

man, not budging from the path. "Who's the boy you got there?"

"No, no. G'by," interrupted the chief, testily. He again spoke in Indian, and with a kick of the heels urged his pony forward.

"My father says we have no time to talk," explained the Charley Indian.

"Oh, haven't yuh?" remarked the man, coolly. "What are these Injuns doing with you, son?" he asked, of Phil.

"I was lost and they found me, that's all," answered Phil.

"You'd better come with us, then. They'll take you clean into Utah."

"No, no!" objected the old chief, now thoroughly mad. He spoke vehemently, and gestured. The man replied, in Mexican, and they argued.

"Come along with us to the ranch," urged the boy, to Phil, in friendly eagerness. "It's the Bar B, on Owl Creek. Do your folks know where you are?"

"No. I wish they did," said Phil, dejected. "Can I get word to them quick from your place?"

"Sure. The stage station is only twenty-five miles. I can ride that easy in two hours and a half. It's most all level."

"Better not talk to him. My father won't like it," interposed the Charley Indian.

"Talk as much as you please, Chet," directed the man, breaking off his dispute with the chief. "No Injun on earth shall say what you or I shall do. Well, boy, are you coming with us? We're white."

"I'd like to," faltered Phil. He hated to make trouble, however.

"That's enough, then. Get off your hawss."

"No, no," snarled the old chief. He hammered his pony and thrust it between, and glared menacingly. His flabby face was full of venom, and darker than ever. His son ranged beside him; from the rear hastened up the other bucks of the band, crowding and jostling forward, foreseeing trouble and ready to be into it. The majority had rifles; two even had bows and arrows—the bows strung.

The boy and man sat without giving way an inch—the former pale beneath his tan, the latter stern, with eyes beginning to glint significantly.

CHAPTER IV

PHIL JOINS THE COWBOYS

THERE was a sudden jingle and scuff, and thud of hoof, and from the cedars close at hand burst two more cowboys. Their horses were blowing, hard ridden. The riders, in chaps and blouses and broad high black hats, peered intently.

"How," they said, laconically. "What's the matter, George?"

One was a young, smooth-faced chap, a mere stripling; the other was somewhat older, bulky and square, with gray eyes and crisp, sandy mustache.

"Why, these Injuns have picked up a white boy and are set on carrying him on with 'em. We think we'll take him back to the ranch, though."

"How'd they get him?"

"He was lost, I hear."

The new-comers eyed Phil, in the midst of the Indians.

"Huh! Who objects? What ails your old man, Charley?"

"We keep him with us, says my father," answered the Indian, doggedly.

"You don't keep him," returned the man with the goatee. "And the quicker you savvy that, all of you, the better for yuh. Get off your hawss, boy, and climb on behind Chet here."

But Phil was helpless.

"No talkee; no talkee! Vamose! Puk-a-chee!" (Get out!) snarled the old chief. He whipped his rifle from its scabbard—but so swiftly that Phil's eye had been unable to follow the smooth-faced stripling cowboy had plucked from some place an automatic pistol, and with a jump of his horse was holding the gun against the chief's side. At the same instant, almost, Chet, of the shaggy white chaps, spurred boldly in and shouldering a passage to Phil seized the buckskin's thong, at the jaw.

"Don't you be scared. We can lick 'em," he said to Phil, reassuringly.

The uproar of excitement which had swelled subsided immediately, for the smooth-faced cowboy was speaking.

"By thunder, you move that rifle an inch an' you're a good Injun," he panted. "Don't you go fingerin' yore gun, either, Charley. When this little Colt's automatic starts to shootin' she don't stop."

"Steady, steady," cautioned the man with the goatee. "Keep him covered, Dick, but don't jam it through his ribs!" And he talked earnestly to the chief, who sat glowering but motionless. Then he addressed the younger Indian.

"You hear what I say. Mebbe you can take the boy, and mebbe you can't. But if it comes to a gun-play and you do get off with him, what's left o' yuh, there'll be whites enough to follow you and head you off before you get very far; and when they get you they won't waste much time pow-wowing. You

might just as well make up your minds to it. And now if you want to start the trouble, move along and try to take the boy."

"Don't yuh wiggle! Don't yuh bat an eye!" warned the smooth-faced cowboy guarding the chief. "If yuh do I'll fill yuh so full of holes yuh won't cast a shadow!"

"Scalp him alive, Dick," applauded the other cowboy, Dick's companion.

The chief, betraying no fear, but very careful of himself, spoke a guttural sentence.

"He says you can have the boy, if he wants to go," interpreted the son.

"He does want to go—and he goes anyway," retorted the man with the goatee. "We'll take the responsibility. You can swap hawsses, boy. I see Chet's right on deck, waiting for you."

Much relieved, Phil tumbled from the buckskin and stiffly established himself behind Chet's shaggy chaps.

"Take your gun off him, Dick," laughed the cowboy of the bulky, square frame.

And Dick, with some reluctance, withdrew the automatic—however, keeping it in sight.

The old chief broke into a torrent of expostulation.

"What's the matter now?" wondered Phil.

"He says to give him some money for you. Got to pay your board bill 'fore you leave," informed the bulky cowboy.

"Money be hanged. Come on, boys," ejaculated the man with the goatee, shortly.

"I'll give him half a dollar," volunteered Phil; adding, wisely, "if I've got it."

"All right. Give it to him, just as you please."

Phil found a half-dollar in his pocket, and extended it.

The old chief took it, and examined it contemptuously.

"No, no! Un peso. One dollie," he vociferated.

"A dollar. He wants a dollar," translated Chet.

Phil found a quarter more.

"That's all I have," he said—for only some bills remained, and he thought it best not to speak of them at present.

"It's plenty—and six bits more than he deserves," declared the man with the goatee, impatiently. "Puk-a-chee, now; all of you. Adios."

'Adios; adios. Good boy," mumbled the old chief, who suddenly appeared quite satisfied again. He insisted upon shaking Phil's hand, and the hand of everybody within reach—except that of Dick. At Dick he fiercely scowled. The ceremony finished, clapping his pony in the ribs he started with dignity onward, and his band followed.

The cowboys, waiting, let the cavalcade, as it fell into place, pass. Not an Indian glanced aside; each rode with face straight before, set like granite. But in the eyes fire smouldered. The last of them presently was lost among the cedars.

However, not absolutely; for at the moment one of them came riding back. It was Charley, the chief's son.

"Here," he said to Phil, placing something in his hand; and wheeling, with no word nor glance for anyone else, he was away again.

Phil examined the article. It was a small bag of buckskin, curiously beaded, and very greasy from viscid contents.

"Well, boy, you nearly were sole survivor of a fust-class Injun massacre," remarked the man of the goatee. "Now tell us about yourself."

Phil told. They all agreed that where he had left the train, or the train had left him, was forty miles away, south. The incident of the men whom he had overheard talking, and who had chased him, interested them greatly.

"They spoke of Bar B and Lazy J cows, 'specially, did they?" mused the man with the goatee. "That comes near home—doesn't it, Henry?"

"Explains a few things, I reckon," commented the bulky man.

"My father owns the Bar B cattle, and those other men are Dick Vorum and Henry Mallison, of the Lazy J," explained Chet. "My name's Chester Simms, and my father is George Simms. We run the most cattle of anybody."

He seemed a good-natured, impulsive chap, did Chet. He was chunky, with light hair and wide blue eyes, round freckled face darker with its tan than his hair, and mouth that turned up at the corners like a gnome's or brownie's. Phil liked him.

By the conversation of the men among themselves, 'twas apparent that they believed the party encoun-

tered the night before by Phil to be thieves or "rustlers" in merely a small way—but nevertheless in a way most annoying, probably collecting a few cattle at a time, selling the meat direct to butchers and doubtless disposing of the hides separately, with the brands altered to block detection. They were a menace; and Phil very readily understood that if caught they would receive short shift. And as to the girl, they must have stolen her, also!

"Did you see any Bar B cows, or Lazy J's, over that way?" queried Mr. Simms.

Phil recollected those cattle of the early morning, with a capital B and straight mark above it ("That's a Bar B!") and a J lying on its back ("That's a Lazy J!"); and the man of the revolver riding near them.

"You say he was running 'round, when he looked for you, carrying a revolver in his left hand?"

"Yes, sir."

"That'll spot him. He's a left-handed shooter," exclaimed the cowboy Dick.

"He limps, too," reminded Phil.

"Well, we'll go on down to the Lazy J camp and have dinner; then Chet and I'll take the boy on to the Bar B," proposed Mr. Simms.

They rode leisurely, descending to the lower country.

"Where's your home, son?" inquired Mr. Simms. Phil told him.

"Is your father K. P. Macowan?"

"No, sir. He's my uncle."

"Jus' so. Well, instead of going on to California you stay at the Bar B and let Chet show you the country and a good time. You write your father and tell him I'm the man your uncle camped with two years ago, when he was out here hunting and we were on the beef roundup. Your uncle will remember. Say you're at the Simms ranch—George Simms'; and that if you stay long enough we'll make a cowman of you. It'll do you more good than all California put together. What do you think, Chet?"

"Will you?" urged Chet, turning eagerly in the saddle.

"I'll write and see." Phil's tired eyes brightened.

"Do it," continued Mr. Simms. "And I'll add a line, and send the letter in to-morrow, to catch the stage. You'll have a week, anyway, before the answer comes. Do you want to be a cowboy for a while?"

Phil nodded.

"Sure. Stay and we'll all show you the country. By the time you get out you can throw a rope and wrestle a calf with anybody," encouraged the cowboy Henry.

"First I'll outfit him with some of Chet's clothes," remarked Mr. Simms, quizzically. "He's worse than a sheep-herder. Looks as though he hadn't drawn pay for a year."

"Must have left a trail of himself on the trees an' bushes all those forty mile," alleged Dick.

And Phil blushed. It occurred to him that he must indeed be a "sight," for he had travelled a hard road. If only they realized how hard!

"What were those Indians going to do with me, do you think?" he asked Chet.

"Aw, nothing much. They're just some of the Southern Utes going up to visit the other Utes on the Uintah reservation over in Utah. That was Captain Billy the chief. I guess he thought he'd hold you and get a lot of money. He's all right when he isn't feeling mean. I bet, though, they wouldn't have given in so easy if they'd been a war party. But they had their squaws along."

"That Indian you called Charley talks English!"

"He's Captain Billy's son—Charley Pow-wow. He can talk as well as you or I. He's been away to school, out East. But sometimes you wouldn't think it."

"Look what he gave me." And Phil showed the little beaded buckskin sack.

"What's in it?"

"Bear-grease to rub on my scratches."

"Good. Bear fat's fine, they say. The Indians all use it. You can rub it on yourself to-night. And that's a dandy little sack."

"Lose yore watch?" queried the cowboy Dick, noting the fragment of chain.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, well," spoke Mr. Simms, "you won't need a watch out here. We get up when it's light and go to bed when it's dark, and eat when we can. Day isn't divided into hours, for us. It's all one. Have a clock at the ranch, and set it by the almanac. But mostly we forget to wind it."

CHAPTER V

AT THE BAR B RANCH

BENEATH his covering of blankets and quilts Phil awoke with a start, and blinked about him. Overhead was a ceiling of whitey muslin stained with brown blotches where the mud from the sod roof had soaked through during rains. Around were walls of rough logs, their adobe chinking protruding, hard as brick, within. From pegs here and there hung old blouses, an old coat of black dog-skin, a pair of worn leather chaps, a cartridge-belt empty, a battered black slouch hat, a frayed, stubby quirt; while a shelf at the foot of the cot held a half score of ragged magazines and paper novels, a box of rifle cartridges, a bottle of pain-killer, a spur with rowel missing. Through the glassless window, whose wooden shutter was swung wide back, streamed daylight and fresh cool air. From the other room, beyond the half-closed plank door, emanated voices, stamping, and yawns.

Oh, yes; Phil recollected. This was the bunk-house of the Bar B cattle ranch, where he had been put to sleep with the "other" cowboys. For if he was to be a cowboy he must sleep in the bunk-house, had said Mr. Simms. And, anyway, this was the only place for him *to* sleep, considering that Mr. Simms and Chet occupied the one real bed of the ranch, and Old Jess, who was temporary cook and

was more or less cranky, occupied the shake-down in the kitchen.

The voices in the other room, amidst stamping of boots and repeated yawns, were discussing dreams. Phil could easily recognize the smooth drawl of Haney, the tall red-headed cowboy from Texas, the more precise accents of Mr. Dexter (whom all called Ford), the good-looking cowboy said to be from Boston and Harvard, and the curter speech of Buster, native Coloradoan.

Next somebody trudged forth, to stick a genial, freckled countenance, beneath thatch of brick-colored hair topped by broad-brimmed, high-crowned, black hat, in through the window beside Phil's cot.

"Howdy. Goin' to get up this mohnin'?" he remarked, surveying Phil quizzically. It was Haney, the red-headed cowboy from Texas.

"Getting up now," responded Phil, throwing back the coverings and springing out.

"Didn't know but what you'd laik to have youah breakfas' fetched in to yuh," he asserted, and disappeared.

The boot stamping in the other room was renewed, and Phil, already wearing a shirt of Chet's, hastened his donning of Chet's stockings and Mr. Dexter's trousers and Mr. Simms' shoes and somebody's old blouse. He yawned tremendously; the lacing of his left shoe jammed under his watery eyes. Yah-hum—how he had slept! And how much better he felt. The night's rest and the bear's grease had worked wonders.

But he was spurred to action again by another

visitor. The round, brown face of Chet looked in upon him unceremoniously through the convenient window. Apprised by the darkening of his light, Phil glanced behind him.

"Hello," he said.

"Getting up?" asked Chet, grinning.

"Be out in a jiffy. Is breakfast ready?" inquired Phil anxiously.

"Pretty near."

"Don't wait for me. I'll be right there," informed Phil.

"Aw, they won't wait," assured Chet, grinning again. "Haney's gone to get the horses, tho', and he'll be back quick if he finds them easy."

Phil wrestled into his coat, seized his hat and hurried forth from the little store-room where he had passed the night. In the other, the main room of the bunk-house, Mr. Dexter, now clad with high-heeled boots, faded blue overalls and big hat similar to Haney's, only drab, sitting alone upon the edge of a tumbled bunk, was laboriously sewing a button to his checkered blouse.

"Well, up for all day?" he greeted. "Ouch!" he added. He examined his thumb, ruefully, and sucked it.

"Yes, sir," declared Phil, emphatically.

He liked Mr. Dexter (or Ford), who was the best-looking of the cowboys yet seen, with regular, clean-cut features, dark eyes and hair, crisp mustache and white teeth and firm chin. Chet had said that he had been to college and was from Boston.

Outside was Chet, already arrayed in his shaggy

white chaps and his gauntlet gloves. He appeared chubbier than ever. He ought to make an awful good center, or fullback, if he were quick enough, thought Phil, sizing him up.

"There come the horses, a-kiting," announced Chet. "After they're in the corral we'll have breakfast. Can you rope a hawss?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

"You'll have to. That's the only way to catch 'em. I can. Want to wash?"

"Yes. Where?"

"In the kitchen, where you did yesterday. But let's see Haney bring in the herd. Maybe we can help."

The sun was just rising over the great sagy, red-cragged hill close on the east and sending his first beams down across the ranch buildings here clustered upon the only flat spot, apparently, in this whole wild country. For all about were the hills, rocky and covered with sage and cedars and pines, while beyond them, northward and southward, were snow ridges above timber-line.

Although 'twas the middle of May the frost glistened upon the turfy roofs, upon the squared ends of the logs, and upon the ground. The air was sweet and filled with the pungent aroma of sage and pine; but it also was sharp, and Phil thrust his hands into his trouser-pockets (or Mr. Dexter's, rather) for warmth.

"See them?" queried Chet.

Following Chet's eyes Phil noted, south against

the base of the encompassing hills, golden dust; and suddenly amidst the dust, uptossing heads, white and dark, and galloping, trotting forms weaving back and forth. Soon, jostling down the lane with Haney ambling complacently behind, came some twenty horses. They slowed and bunched, for a moment, at sight of the boys; then, at a yelp from Haney, led by a sedate iron-speckled horse christened, as Phil eventually knew, Gray Jack, they poured, playing and biting and kicking, in through the open gate of the corral.

With chaps scuffing delightfully, Chet ran and closed the gate. Haney swung to earth, unsaddled and unbridled like lightning, and at a slap upon the flank his own horse trotted gleesomely up the lane again and back into the sage, where it stood and whinnied for company.

"Grub pi-ile," sighed Haney, sauntering toward the ranch-house. He halted and removed his spurs. "My goodness me, boy!" he accosted, with a side glance at Chet. "Did youah daddy sleep with his leather pants on, too? That bed must be gettin' right lively."

Chet blushed, awkwardly.

"Come on," he bade, to Phil. "Better wash before Haney does. He'll set the water to boiling."

"Done washed, myself," drawled Haney, undisturbed. "Always was taught to wash an' comb my haih soon as I got up!"

Phil was conscious that the shaft hit *him*.

The ranch-house was a low one-story log structure,

divided into "office" and kitchen. The office was really the private room of Mr. Simms, where he not only might attend to his correspondence, but where he sat when not busied outside, and where he and Chet slept. The kitchen was the meal-time gathering place. Now it was sizzling with frying meat and potatoes, and was rife with the alluring odor of coffee. The atmosphere of warmth and promise appealed to Phil mightily, and seemed to be exciting pleasurable emotions also in Tom, the ranch's big brindled cat, who with stub tail stiffly erect was stalking around Old Jess the cook, and the beaming hot stove.

The cowboy Buster (a wiry, small-boned youth; lithe, tow-headed and saying little) emptied the tin basin out of the door as Chet and Phil entered; then he proceeded to polish his face on the crash towel behind the door.

"Go ahead," instructed Mr. Dexter, whose button was on and who evidently was waiting for a turn at the basin.

"Yes, he's in no hurry. He washed in Boston befoh he came out," explained the irrepressible Haney.

"That's more than you did before you left Texas," retorted Mr. Dexter.

"He didn't have time to stop an' wash. Was travelin' too fast," averred Old Jess, from the stove.

Haney only grinned in response; and hanging his broad, high hat on a nail, seated himself in a chair, to tilt back against a post-pillar, and swing booted feet and bide another opening.



HANEY'S NOOSE WAS UPON HIS HORSE, AT LAST

Taking Mr. Dexter at his word, Phil proceeded to fill the basin and to scrub his face and hands with lather. Tom, the enormous cat aforesaid, at a dignified pace crossed the room and unhesitatingly jumped upon Haney's lap, where he squatted content.

"Howdy to *you*, then," said Haney, tickling Tom's pads—whereat Tom simultaneously growled protest and purred luxury. "Mus' think I'm a pack hawss. Ought not to fool with a man 'foh breakfas'."

"Where's the boss?" asked Old Jess, of Chet. "Better call him, hadn't yuh? Breakfas' is ready."

"Here he is——" and Mr. Simms, tall, spare, thin of flank, long of leg, straight of back, a typical Western cowman, built to ride, entered.

"Hello, boy," he remarked, nodding all around and following Mr. Dexter at the basin. "Sleep well? Those fellows didn't keep you awake with their snoring?"

"No, suh. 'He was too busy bustin' broncos all night to mind anybody snorin'," put in Haney, promptly. "I declare, he romped 'round in there somethin' frightful."

At such a whopper Phil could but gasp. He never knew what this red-headed Haney was going to say next—nor did anybody else, he soon learned.

"I see Chet is all ready," continued Mr. Simms, from the folds of the crash towel.

"Yes, suh. We-all reckoned he wore his chaps the plumb night through," volunteered Haney. "Wanted to get after those rustlers bright an' early."

"I wish somebody would get after them, and get after them proper," said Mr. Simms, emphatically. "Chet can sleep with his spurs on, too, and I'll never complain, if it will help us run those thieves to their holes."

"Well, we got this new man on the range, now," proffered Haney, solemnly, still tickling Tom's feet. "Way he was ra'in an' teahin' 'round in his end o' the bunk-house las' night there won't be room foh him an' any rustlers togethuh in *this* country, I tell yuh!"

"No; there isn't room for anybody who can make a TB out of a Bar B, sure," decreed Mr. Simms.

Phil listened with a little thrill. But Old Jess interrupted.

"Fall to it, boys," he bade.

"Come on," warned Chet, to Phil.

Haney unceremoniously dumped Tom to the floor; and with clump of boot and sundry scraping, the four men and the two boys seated themselves upon the bench which ran along either side of the oil-cloth covered board table. Phil's place, as on the preceding evening, was between Chet and Mr. Dexter.

Presently the cowboy Buster, who had been finishing with bread and sorghum, and had polished his plate, heaved a sigh, and twisting sideways extricated himself from the table. Mr. Simms likewise arose. So did Haney.

"'Fraid Smith-Jones ain't feelin' very puht this mohnin'," he alleged, gravely—referring to Phil. "Don't appeah to eat."

And thereafter he unvaryingly designated Phil as "Smith-Jones," claiming that he never could remember names.

With Chet Phil emerged, feeling well fortified against the day, into the out-of-doors. The sun was hot, spreading his golden largesse over the sage far and wide, and over slope and crest. Flies were buzzing; but in the shade of the buildings the frost was still heavy, and the boards of the fences were marked in white upon the ground.

The men (except Old Jess, who in his capacity of cook remained to wash the dishes) strolled nonchalantly to the blacksmith shop and tool shed, toward the corral. Along the log front, upon which were nailed several coyote and wolf pelts and a double row of mountain lion tails, peeled (trophies which fascinated Phil's eyes and thoughts), under the broad eaves, were lying upon their sides a number of saddles, with the saddle-blankets thrown carelessly across them. Each man untied from his saddle a coil of rope.

"What can Phil ride, daddie?" queried Chet—now, like the rest of them, with rope in hand.

Phil, who had helplessly been watching proceedings, wondering where he came in, listened, silent but expectant.

"Let me see," mused Mr. Simms. He eyed the corral. "I think we'll give him Pepper this morning. Pepper's gentle."

"I dunno," murmured Haney, who was pulling on a pair of leather chaps with flapping wings brass-

studded along the edges. "Awful frisky hawss, that. Wouldn't ketch me ridin' him. Uh-um-m-m!"

Phil could not repress a slight natural sensation of alarm; but——

"Don't you mind what he says," reassured Chet. "He's only trying to shoot it into you. Pepper won't do anything. Come on and I'll rope him for you. You bring that old piece of rope so you can lead him out."

The corral was a space some twenty yards across, fenced about, rudely circular, by aspen poles, with their ends held between pairs of cedar posts. At the entrance, through the gate, of the men with their coils of rope, the twenty horses immediately crowded in a group at the far side, and every animal, ostrich fashion, tried to hide his head amidst his fellows. The horses upon the outskirts shoved frantically and nipped right and left, to work into the center. To Phil, hanging upon the rails near the gate, and observing, this seemed pretty smart of the horses.

Mr. Dexter walked straight across, shaking out the loop in his right hand, holding the coil in his left. The group of crowding horses broke—and instantly with a quick flirt he cast. "Good!" almost applauded Phil, for a chestnut horse apparently ran his head right into the wide noose as it hovered over him.

Mr. Dexter gave a little jerk, the horse stopped in his tracks and obediently came along at the end of the rope. Mr. Dexter led him through the gate, which Phil opened and closed.

Buster, too, had readily noosed his horse—a big

roan. Mr. Simms did not throw his rope, but with "Look out!" "Steady, there!" "Whoa, now!" advanced, wary but firm, straight up to his horse, and slipped the noose right over its head, unresisted. Mr. Simms' influence upon horses was of this rare nature: he could approach them, talking to them, and they would let him. In corral and pasture he seldom threw his rope. His method was less spectacular, but sufficient.

The horses were racing tumultuously around and around the corral, as in a circus ring, while at the center, like ring-masters, stood Haney and Chet. Haney had not thrown, yet; with his loop swinging about his head he had vainly been waiting a chance.

"That blame pinto hawss—he's too cute to live much longer," scolded Haney, wrathfully. "Look at him, will yuh? Keeps behind that Rover laik he was stuck to him!"

Chet had been throwing again and again, but had caught only a post—twice. Suddenly Haney's loop shot out and neatly settled upon the horse that Chet was after.

"Here's youah hawss," presented Haney. "Take him out. You bothuh me. Fust thing you know you'll ketch somethin' by the foot, an' then there'll be nothin' but trouble."

Chet had *not* been remarkably successful, and very red with exertion and chagrin he traded ropes upon the horse's neck and made exit with his mount. Phil politely pretended not to notice him; but roping looked easy.

Hurrah! Haney's noose was upon his horse, at last. And now, amidst laughter, his high heels pegging into the ground as he set back, half doubled, upon the rope, he was being tugged about the corral, through dust and mud, by the plunging pinto.

But under the savage jerks and the dead weight of 180 pounds the pinto's wind was failing rapidly, and in a moment he stood, docile, flanks trembling, sides heaving.

"Yuh, come along, yuh, if yuh got enough," panted Haney. And the pinto—who was curiously blotched with white and brown—came.

"Well, son, where's your horse?" Phil heard at his elbow as he closed the gate. 'Twas Mr. Dexter, who had bridled and saddled and returned.

Sure enough. It seemed as though Phil was being forgotten. Thus he was early having it impressed upon him that in the open West man and even boy must look out for himself.

"He's Pepper. He's in there, but I don't know which one," answered Phil.

"I guess I'd better catch him for you," volunteered Mr. Dexter. "You can do your own roping next time. Pepper's that little speckled blue—iron-gray you'd call him—with a diamond on the right hip. Hold the gate——"

By a quick toss of his head Pepper adroitly dodged the loop; but Mr. Dexter, laughing gleefully, threw again, from behind, and brought him up short.

"Put your piece of rope around his neck; now you have him." And Phil, much relieved, conducted Pep-

per out to the saddling place before the blacksmith shop.

"Leave the gate open," had directed Mr. Dexter. Following Pepper's exit, forth sidled all the free horses, to scuttle up the lane and to pasture. This was not their day.

"We'll give you Jess' old tree, to-day, boy," announced Mr. Simms. "It'll hold together, I reckon, and there'll be an extra saddle come down from the hawss camp with Hombre that you can have. Here's a bridle. You can use that sacking for saddle blanket until we find something better. You and Chet can ride with Haney this morning. I'll take your letters into town. Did you write to have your baggage attended to at the other end?"

"Yes, sir."

"Somebody saddle up for Smith-Jones, then. Cain't wait long," admonished Haney, who was buckling on his spurs. "Fifty miles to go and back 'foh dinner!"

"Here—I'll show you," said Mr. Dexter; and twitching the sacking into better position he took the old saddle (worn though it was almost to the original frame or tree it weighed more than Phil had figured) from Phil's hands and chucked it easily into place upon Pepper's back. While he straightened the single girth and fastened it, Mr. Simms supplemented the operations by stepping forward and fitting the bridle into place.

"There you are," he said. "How are you? Pretty good on the ride?"

"Yes, sir. I ride our horse at home, some," informed Phil.

"Get aboard, then. *Other side*, or he'll throw you, sure! Never mount a hawss in this country from the right side—unless he's an Injun hawss, and you can't always tell, even in that case."

Chet giggled; but Phil, abashed at his mistake and at apparently keeping everybody waiting, was conscious, as he now essayed Pepper's left side, that no one else was laughing. Even Haney sat his horse, gravely if critically observing. As for Chet—well, Chet had caught only a post in the corral, for all his exhibit of big shaggy white chaps.

"Is Smith-Jones on?" questioned Haney, quite superfluously.

"Stirrups feel right?" asked Mr. Dexter, quietly, pulling at them. "Yes, he's on," he responded, at Phil's nod.

"Good," decreed Haney, wheeling his horse. "Now the bears an' rustlers shuah better hide up, foh Smith-Jones an' Chet an' me are headin' squah into their country."

And Haney spoke more truly than he knew.

CHAPTER VI

PHIL RIDES THE RANGE

THE ranch buildings were along the course of a muddy, crooked creek whose bed was fifteen feet below between steep shale-and-adobe banks. A path descended to the creek ford; Haney plunged down; so did Chet; and Phil, feeling curiously elevated and tucked in on his cowboy saddle with its high pommel and cantel, followed. The current, yellow and swift from the snows yet melting upon these white ridges far south, would bar the progress; but Haney, with a jab of his spurs, forced his horse right in. The heavy water swirled about his stirrups; he disdained to withdraw his feet, and let them hang. Chet held his ludicrously extended before him.

"You want to head up, Smith-Jones," called Haney, halting on the trail which climbed the farther bank. "There's a big hole, jes' below. It shuah will drown yuh, if you get in."

With a snort Pepper entered the stream. Phil raised his feet, but the depth increased alarmingly, and the current seemed to be carrying Pepper with it.

"Head him up! Head him up!" enjoined Haney, earnestly.

"You're down too far. Kick him in the ribs," cried Chet, from safety.

Phil incautiously lowered one foot, to kick, and

doused it to the ankle. But Pepper was struggling gallantly, and with the water against his breast was obliquing up, inch by inch. The water shoaled, and with one foot wet and a slight breathlessness Phil was borne out to fall in behind the others.

"Mos' lost Smith-Jones that time," decreed Haney, over his shoulder, as if communing with the landscape.

"Your foot will dry in a little bit," comforted Chet.

"Oh, I don't care," declared Phil, bluffly.

They followed the gravelly trail winding over the sagy hill; Haney was before, and from the rear Phil could note his long easy seat in the saddle, where he was one with every movement of his pinto; Chet, too, seemed to "fit" exactly. His chaps and Haney's were as if measured to the horses' sides. Holding his bridle hand high, and sitting straight, Phil unconsciously imitated. He was a cowboy.

On the other side the hill sloped gently away into a long, wide flat, extending north and south, and gray with the everlasting sage. Haney broke his pinto into a gallop; on they sped, for a few minutes, Chet and Haney abreast, Phil on Pepper close behind. Having given the horses a breather, they slackened to a walk.

Ah, this was glorious. Phil was keenly alive, drinking in the experience. The sky was very blue, the sun shone full, the air was pungently sweet, around stretched the vast expanse of sage and greasewood, bordered by rock and pine and cedar. Overhead, in the blue, floated a black turkey buzzard; the only

mark. No sound was to be heard except the thud of the horses' hoofs, clank of bridle and spur, and scuff of chap. Phil urged Pepper into the front rank, and now the three of them rode in a line, like knights errant.

Haney pointed with gloved hand down beside his horse, at the trail. "Big ol' wolf," he volunteered. "Wonder where he was goin'. Followin' the trail laik he was a dog."

Phil veered over to examine; and in the dust he saw plainly the prints of a padded foot—large and round; but for all that he could tell it might have been a dog's.

"Lookin' for some daown animal, or weak calf, I reckon," said Haney.

"I'd like to get him, wouldn't you?" exclaimed Chet.

"Mistuh Wolf's pretty smart. He ain't 'round hankerin' to be skinned. Laik as not he's layin' up among those rocks right now, lookin' at us," averred Haney.

Phil gazed apprehensively at the mass of rocks upstanding beside the trail. But he descried no prick-ears and sharp snout of a wolf.

"Under places like those is where the caows get in out o' the wind an' weather, Smith-Jones," said Haney, with a side nod of his head indicating the trampled space of ground beneath a lime-stone shelf.

"They get in there and they get in under the cedars, too," said Chet. "The Bar B has the best winter range anywhere around."

They changed from a walk to a trot, and Phil fell in behind again, as Pepper seemed to prefer the trail to dodging the sage. Trot, trot, trot, with Haney standing in his stirrups, a hand upon the horn, Chet doing the same, and Phil trying to imitate them both. Pepper's trot was not the easiest motion in the world, and kept Phil busy experimenting with it. A deep arroyo, or dried water course, cut their way; with the horses sliding down its loose bank they entered it, and after following it for one hundred yards climbed out again, with the trail.

Twice they crossed the arroyos, Haney and Chet seeming to know intuitively the route through. But the bottoms were so traveled by cattle tracks that Phil could not have told which way to turn.

"Those look laik some o' them, yonder," announced Haney; he abruptly pulled his pinto from the trail and went at a gallop through the sage, to the left. Chet instantly followed; without any impetus from Phil, Pepper did the same. As Pepper weaved through the tall brush Phil had all that he could do to stick on, and he ignominiously held to the horn. Suddenly Haney pulled up sharply, and turned for the trail again. So did Chet. He grinned as he noted Phil's clutch.

"You won't fall off," he said. "This ain't anything—galloping easy through the sage. Wait till you're following a steer and trying to catch him!"

"What's the matter? What made Haney turn back?" asked Phil.

"I guess those aren't Bar B cattle, after all," answered Chet. "He thought they might be."

"Those are Lazy J stock," announced Haney.
 "Except that big yearlin'. He's Bar B, all right."

"How do you know, so far?" ventured Phil.

"Can see," responded Haney, laconically. "Bar B ear mark's a square crop on the left; all those cattle except the big yearlin' have a swallow-fohk."

Phil pondered. He could scarcely distinguish the animals themselves; Haney had made out the ears. Huh! He had more respect for Haney.

"Could you see the ear-marks, Chet?" he asked.

"Not all," admitted Chet. "But Haney can see an ear-mark a mile."

"Sometimes five mile, when I got my glasses on!" supplemented Haney, composedly. "When an animal raises his haid that way you can see the ear-mark fust!"

Presently he turned off again, but rode only at a trot, making toward more cattle grazing in the sage.

"You an' 'Smith-Jones hold 'em, while I ride 'round," he directed to Chet. "Lot o' calves in there."

"We'll spread out, so as to stop 'em if they try to run," explained Chet. "He wants to see if they're all branded."

So with Chet swinging toward the fore of the bunch of animals, and Haney cutting in at the rear, Phil, on the middle course, watched. The cattle held high their heads, and several arose hastily to their feet. Little calves scampered with tails up to join their mammies, who protested with lowered heads against the horsemen's approach. Phil halted. He had gone far enough.

Haney rode at a walk here and there, now standing

in his stirrups to peer, now settling down again. Suddenly he shook out his rope, and the lengthening loop began to circle about his head. His horse quickened to a gallop and out from the edge of the little herd they burst, pursuing a half-grown heifer. The heifer ran like a deer. With a whoop of delight Chet wheeled to the chase, preparing his own rope. And now crashing through the sage they came, the heifer bawling and jumping, the two riders hard behind swinging their loops with one hand, holding the coil in the other, and sitting as securely as though glued to the saddle. The herd went galloping off, except one old cow, the heifer's fond mother, who lingered and stared anxiously.

The heifer turned for her, and scurried across Chet's path. He threw like an expert, and the noose fell true, to tighten on the heifer's horns.

"Broken naik! Let go," warned Haney; and away went the heifer with the rope trailing.

Chet, now ropeless, pulled up disappointed.

"I got her, tho', didn't I?" he appealed to Phil.

"You bet you did," corroborated Phil, vastly excited.

Spurring his pinto Haney rode like a demon, and rapidly closed the gap opened out by the heifer's fresh endeavors. His noose sailed forth, and landed easily about her outstretched neck.

"He's got her!" yelled Chet. "Come on!"

They tore through the sage. Phil clung for dear life to the saddle-horn. As the noose tightened Haney had spurred forward to give more slack; then

his knowing pinto had turned at right angles. The rope tightened with a jerk, and the heifer, describing a somersault, landed with a thud and lay on her side, too winded even to bawl. The mother cow, at a little distance, waited and gazed, lowing inquiringly.

"All over," decreed Haney, cheerfully, dismounting. His pinto stood, with head turned and ears pricked, keeping the rope tight. The heifer was wheezing loudly, for the noose was shutting off her breath. Haney ran, clumsy in his chaps, through the sage, and drawing a piece of small rope from his pocket, bending over the prostrate victim proceeded to tie her feet together. Chet, who also had dismounted, ran and sat on her head.

"Ease up on the rope a little, will yuh?" called Haney, to Phil. "She's a-chokin' to death, I reckon. That pinto is holdin' too hahd."

Glad to occupy himself someway Phil dismounted, dropped the lines as he had seen the others do, and hastening to the pinto moved him a few steps, slackening the taut rope.

By this time Haney had half-hitched the heifer's four feet together in a bunch; bracing a boot on her side he pulled the tie-string into a tight knot. Chet removed the noose from her neck, and there she lay, helpless, now bawling sonorously, her swelling sides heaving, her eyes rolling.

"Thought Smith-Jones would have a fiah all goin', by this time," complained Haney. He broke off a few dried stalks of the sage, heaped them together, and crouching over them applied a match. Chet brought

him more stalks, and Phil, admonished by word and action, did the same.

"Just the dry pieces," instructed Chet, businesslike in his bearing and chap-clad legs.

The sage burned briskly; the prone heifer continued to bawl. Haney, having fed the blaze to his satisfaction, straightened and trudged through the brush to his pinto, who stood dozing. He fumbled at the saddle, untying something, and returned with a pair of flat-rimmed rings, composed of horse-shoes with their points welded together. These he tucked among the embers. He gravely squatted again. Chet squatted. Phil squatted. The heifer bawled, unceasingly, the old cow, her mother, at a little distance watching, lowed plaintive response, the three horses stood with drooping heads, snatching their forty winks.

"You hush up, now," ordered Haney, rising and stepping to the heifer. "Goin' to tuh'n you over an' give you somethin' to bawl *about*." Whereupon by the tail and feet he flopped the victim over. "Now you goin' to get youah medicine," he informed; and he extracted one of the welded horse-shoes from the coals. Inserting a pair of sticks, crossed, through it, he cleverly held it, as by a handle. Kneeling upon the heifer he began to burn her flank—pressing hard and inscribing painstakingly a large B. The hair smoked, the flesh sizzled, the heifer bawled angrily, the old cow lowed, and a little thrill of pity and horror ran through Phil.

"That must hurt," he exclaimed.

"Cain't help it," grunted Haney. "Everybody's

got to get hurt some in this world. Never knew a caow to die o' brandin', yet."

"It's no worse than tattooing," declared Chet.

"Only, the cattle don't want to be tattooed."

"Don't reckon this hurt lasts long," grunted Haney.

"Let 'em up and laik as not they go right to eatin'. Hush, yuh," he ordered. "You'll make youah mammy ashamed o' yuh. I got to burn the bar yet. Hush up! Almost a yearlin', an' bellerin' laik that!"

He threw his horse-shoe down, and took the other one. Above the B he limned a bar. Standing he surveyed his work critically.

"Sho', now," he said, suddenly. "Mos' fohgot the dew-lap." Dropping his branding-iron he kneeled at the heifer's head, and drawing his pocket knife, opened it; stretching the skin of the throat he cut a slash, so that a strip of the skin hung free. Phil, with alarm, thought for a moment that Haney was killing the poor animal. But the cut was only skin-deep. The heifer, whose bawls had died to an exhausted moan, clamored afresh.

"Let yuh up now," quoth Haney. "Think you'll be kind o' rambunctious, hey?"

Chet scrambled to his feet, and so did Phil, and they ran back toward their horses. Haney bent over the animal, untied her feet, and twitched off the rope.

"Get up. Youah mammy's waitin' foh yuh," he urged, applying his toe fearlessly.

CHAPTER VII

PHIL HOLDS THE LITTLE RED BULL

WITH sudden realization that she was free the heifer lurched to her feet, for an instant unsteady, glowering and puffing. Haney sprang back, laughing gleefully, ready to dodge or to stand; but bawling, she went trotting away. Her mother met her, nosed her wounds, licked her, and presently gave her liquid refreshment.

"Look at that, will yuh!" directed Haney, disgusted. "Big as her mammy an' still a-drinkin' milk. Where's my other saddle-iron? You got it, Smith-Jones?"

"What is it? That ring you used?"

"Yes, suh. Threw both daown. Cain't only find one."

Phil, advancing, at that moment stepped on it, where it had rolled.

"Here it is," he said. "Ouch," for it was still hot.

Haney picked it up with a stick, and carried it, with its mate, to his saddle.

"These are saddle-irons," he informed. "Ain't allowed to carry 'em on mos' ranges; liable to get held up foh a rustler, if yuh do. Carry 'em in this rough country 'cause we have to brand critters where we find 'em. Round-up misses a lot. Use regular stamp-iron at the round-up."

"When is a round-up?" asked Phil.

"Calf round-up foh this district comes next month, I reckon," said Haney, who, having tied his saddle-irons to the saddle, was engaged in coiling his rope. "Yes, suh," he affirmed, swinging into the saddle. "If I was caught with these closed hawss-shoes on my saddle, daown south or up nawth, I'd get all shot to pieces, laik as not."

They passed through several other bunches of cattle, but no branding was necessary. A sagy draw came in at right angles, to join the flat, and into this they turned, following a well-worn cattle trail.

"Corduroy's goin' up, I see," remarked Haney, gravely.

Phil could only flush, and try to kick his trousers to met his shoe-tops again. Under the walking, trotting and galloping they were always creeping higher along his calf; when Haney spoke they were half way to his knee. He was aware also that the stirrups were wearing a hole into his shin, and that the saddle seams were rubbing raw his thighs. There was more motion about Pepper than he had expected. But he said not a word.

The draw proved to have fully two hundred cattle in it, some collected about a small pond or water-hole near its mouth.

"Cattle are comin' daown pretty well, seems laik," vouchsafed Haney. "But there's a whole lot in the hills, yet. Long's they can get plenty to drink up there, they stay."

He had been glancing alertly about, as he rode on;

and now he pulled his horse short, and scrutinized a stout red bull, who half-sullenly, half-stupidly, faced them.

"Sakes alive, boy, where'd you come from?" inquired Haney, of the bull. "Ain't yuh kind o' lost? Where you been keepin' youahself?"

He slowly rode around the little bull, which steadily fronted him, with lowered head and round bulging eyes and stubby but sharp horns.

"A shuah 'nough maverick," declared Haney. "Pretty tough ol' chap to manage, but we'll have to get after him, Chet—Smith-Jones helpin'. Bar B might as well have him as anybody. He's on our range. Ain't got no mammy, far as I can see. Mus' have left her last fall."

He took down his rope, and Chet took down his. The little bull lowed menacingly, even plaintively, as if he realized that an evil hour was upon him.

"Tell me what to do, if there is anything, Haney," prompted Phil, helpless as usual. "I'm no good at this sort of thing."

"That's true, you ain't," agreed Haney, calmly. "But you'll learn, Smith-Jones. Chet, you get youah rope 'round his naik (he was referring now to the little bull), an' when he's prancin' I'll ketch him by the laigs, an' we'll stretch him. Easy, now. Go right up along him an' drop it over. What yuh 'fraid of. That's the way. Now yuh got him."

Thus incited, Chet, urging his horse to the bull, from rearward had tossed his noose over the bull's head; and now paying off drew it tight. Annoyed by

the sensation, the little red bull began to plunge and lunge.

"Keep out of his way, Smith-Jones," warned Haney, above the bawling. "You an' Chet watch his front end; I'll take care of his hind end;" and following close, he flipped the noose over the bull's back so that it swung under and along the ground. In an instant the bull had thrust a hind leg through.

"Got him by the laig, got him by the laig!" announced Haney, excited or pretending to be excited. "'Drather have him by both. Goin' to swing him now, Smith-Jones. Get out o' my road."

By a rapid circle Haney swept the bull from his feet, and he came to the ground with a thud. Phil, anxious to show a helping spirit, slid from the saddle and ran and sat on the little bull's head. The animal's breath came hot and wheezy, and his eyes rolled up red but appealing.

"'Ray for Smith-Jones," cheered Haney. "Cain't get away now, Mr. Bull. Hold him, Smith-Jones, till we tie his other laig up."

Leaving his horse, Haney ran over.

"Don't need you at his haid," he said. "Chet'll take care of his haid. Ketch his upper hind laig, the one with the rope on, in both youah hands, an' stick youah foot against his other laig, at the joint, this way. Savvy? Brace youahself an' hol' tight an' he cain't budge. Now you got him."

Sitting as instructed, Phil held on, at the kicking end of the little bull, for dear life.

Haney busied himself building a fire. Then having

put his irons into the blaze, stooping over the bull's head, with his pocket-knife he cut the left ear squarely across. A tiny stream of blood squirted out and struck Phil in the face, but he did not dare to relax his attitude. He was like the man who around the tree has hold of the bear's tail.

"You didn't do that to the other one we caught," he said.

"Dew-lap the she-stock on this range; square crop the bulls an' steers," informed Haney. "Hol' tight," he cautioned, busying himself farther. The prostrate animal gave a succession of squirms most extraordinarily vigorous, and Phil was jerked now forward, now back.

"Hold him, hold him, Smith-Jones," encouraged Haney, leaping to one side.

For his life Phil clung to the spasmodic legs; but he might as well, it seemed to him, have "held" an earthquake. One last convulsive thrust sent him flying backwards, head over heels in the sage. He picked himself up while still in motion, alert to flee; but Haney was sitting on the bull's head, and all was quiet except uproarious laughter.

On his horse, Chet was doubled over, shrieking, and Haney was indulging in extravagant whoops of glee.

"Hurt you?" called Chet.

"Not a bit."

He well might have been mad—and he realized that he *was* mad; but he also realized that he need not have run, because the bull, with a rope on his neck

and another on his hind leg, was helpless. So his indignation resulted in his promptly returning to his post, and re-pinioning the bull's hind quarters.

"Smith-Jones comes right back again. Cain't kill him," remarked Haney. He proceeded with the branding, while the bull groaned and bellowed.

"You want to look out when he gets up," warned Chet. "He's got blood in his eye."

"So's Smith-Jones," chuckled Haney—and Phil wondered if he spoke literally.

Haney had executed an enormous Bar B on the bull's flank, and stepped back to enjoy it.

"There's a brand you'll see 'foh you can see the caow," he declared, satisfied.

"Only, this isn't a cow," corrected Phil, slyly.

"All animals on the range are caows," returned Haney. "He's an' she's, ol' an' young, all caows. Lemme get that rope off his laig."

He slipped the noose off; taking it to the pinto he leisurely recoiled it, and hung it in place, and tied the saddle-iron. He returned to the scene and put out the fire by a few stamps.

"Here's youah rope, Chet," he announced, sitting on the late victim's head. "You go an' get on youah hawss, Smith-Jones. There's laikly to be somethin' doin', in a minute."

Without ceremony Phil released his hold upon the animal's hind legs and ran for his horse. He climbed aboard, and sitting alert for what might happen, watched.

With a glance around to see that all was clear,

Haney slowly arose, pushing down the bull's head with his hands until the last moment. With a spring backward he turned and ran—not now laughing but dead in earnest.

“Look out! He's coming!” shouted Chet.

For an instant the animal had lain as before; but with a sudden movement he had gained his feet all at once, so to speak, and bloody, enraged, had glared about him. The first glimpse of Haney's retreating form had been sufficient, and now he charged, across the sage, tail up, head down, a compact bundle of outraged dignity.

“Look out!” yelled Chet.

“Look out!” cried Phil.

Clumsy in his chaps Haney stumbled on the brush and pitched headlong. On hands and knees he ludicrously scrambled, turning at right angles just as the bull, half blind with rage and pain, swept past like a small red hurricane, impaling, en route, the big black hat.

Phil involuntarily impelled Pepper forward, to intercept the animal when it returned. He did not know what ought to be done, but he was plucky enough to want to do it.

“All right, Smith-Jones,” proclaimed Haney, breathlessly, from the saddle which he had miraculously gained. “Want my hat, now.”

He spurred his pinto toward the enemy, who, having lost the hat, had wheeled, and was standing, lowering and sullenly bellowing.

“If you wa'n't wuth twenty-five dollars to the Bar

B, I'd suhtinly bust youah naik, laik yuh almost busted mine," addressed Haney. "Gimme that hat."

Within a few feet of the bull he coolly leaned from the saddle and picked his hat from amidst the brush. At the same instant, the enemy, seeing the man separate himself from the horse, charged again; the pinto jumped aside, and Haney, almost unseated, was borne away clinging like a Comanche—or (but Phil would not have dared say so) like a monkey.

"All right, Mistuh Red," called Haney. "Cain't fool with yuh any moh. Jes' wanted my hat."

So they left the sturdy little fellow in possession. As long as they could see him he was standing there in an attitude of offense and defense.

"Expect he would have hurt some if he'd struck you, wouldn't he?" asked Phil.

"Made me black an' blue, I reckon," quoth Haney, carelessly.

"Just a knock from a calf leaves a spot that lasts six weeks," supplemented Chet. "Remember where I got bunted, last fall, Haney?"

Haney nodded. He sang, in an easy tenor:

"Little black bull come daown the mountain,
Daown the mountain, daown the mountain;
Little black bull come daown the mountain,
Long time ago!"

"Ought to be a little *red* bull," corrected Chet.

"No, suh," said Haney, stubbornly. "That 's a good ol' song o' the Texas trail, an' cain't be changed for nobody."

CHAPTER VIII

PHIL IS LOST AGAIN

THEY rode on up the draw, which gradually narrowed—on the right hand high rim-rock, on the left heavily wooded slopes. Haney obliqued to the left, and followed a trail which climbed into the timber. He pointed down beside him.

“See that, Smith-Jones?” he directed. “Big ol’ bear travelin’ same way we are. Went along here this mohnin’.”

“Not a *very* big one, Haney,” criticised Chet; “we’ve seen lots bigger tracks than this.”

The prints in the dust were half as long as Phil’s forearm, and seemed to him plenty big enough. It looked as though a person with a very flat foot, number 12, had walked bare-soled.

“One o’ those kind o’ bear that weighs two hundred pounds ’foh you meet him, and ten hundred when you do meet him. Want to ketch up with him, Smith-Jones?”

“Not unless you do,” retorted Phil, determined to hold his own.

“Done had my fight, this mohnin’,” said Haney.

The tracks continued some distance, then ceased, much to Phil’s relief.

“Bear are comin’ out o’ their holes an’ travelin’ foh somethin’ to eat,” explained Haney.

They wound up, single file, to the top of the slope, and Haney broke into a trot again. The trail twisted and turned among the cedars; Phil found himself continually dodging boughs and branches, and having to keep a keen look-out that his legs were not scraped against trunks. There was an excitement about such a gait.

The atmosphere here was different from that down in the sage. Sun and shade mingled, and the scent of cedar was strong. The ground was covered with their dried fronds, and with the needles of pines; and moist spots, from the melting snows above permeating through, were frequent. Several times little springs were encountered; but thirsty as he was, Phil did not dare to dismount and drink, for it was all he could do, on Pepper (who took advantage of the absence of spurs), to keep Chet in sight. Both the pinto and Chet's horse seemed to trot faster.

Trot, trot, trot, dodging branches, circumventing quick turns, and peering anxiously ahead to see what was coming next. Trot, trot, trot, with the stirrups eating into the flesh and the saddle-seams rubbing more and more. Trot, trot, trot, ever in danger of being left behind. And where was that bear who had followed the trail not many hours before?

The trail began to descend. Phil found the trotting down-hill much more uncomfortable than the trotting on the level; for in dodging the branches he was constantly being thrown against the saddle-horn, and even upon Pepper's neck. After an interminable time, during which Chet and Haney seemed to have van-

ished, he and Pepper emerged at the bottom of another draw, where, much to his relief, Chet was waiting.

Beyond, some cattle were grazing, and Haney was riding toward them, to inspect. Having circled them, he turned and rode up the slope, without coming back; and saying, "He's going on," Chet started to overtake him.

Phil stuck close to Chet's heels. He had not the slightest idea where he was—the twists and turns had been so frequent—nor where lay the ranch. To lose Chet now would certainly be a calamity, for this was the heart of the wilderness.

They had left the trail, and were cutting across through the thousand cedars; weaving in and out among the crooked trunks and low branches. Evidences of cattle were everywhere; under some of the cedars cattle must have spent many hours, collected there out of the storms. While Phil was wondering where on earth Chet was going, close behind him he came out into a natural park of grass and flowers; ahead, Haney, small amidst the vastness of space, was climbing the slope of a hill.

At the top he halted a moment; then in an instant he dashed over and down.

"He sees some cattle; hurry up," exclaimed Chet; and veering to circumvent the base of the hill he, too, with a jump, was off at full speed.

Frantically as he would kick Pepper in the ribs, Phil perceived himself being left. Chet disappeared among the cedars, and Phil's course was still slower,

because the branches were threatening to sweep him, every moment, from the saddle. Pepper persisted in trotting instead of galloping; now and then he would sulkily settle to a walk. He was soldiering, was Pepper.

Wellnigh crying with vexation, Phil pressed on in the direction where Chet had apparently been making. There was a tremendous crashing and crackling. His heart leaped into his mouth. Running like a deer a black calf crossed close in front of them—and here, relentless on its heels, riding like a demon, reins loose on his pinto's neck, leaning forward and swinging his rope, followed Haney, careening through the trees as if he bore a charmed life. Leaving a wake of broken branches and crackling twigs and brush, he plunged from sight again.

Phil hauled on the bit and kicked Pepper in the ribs, turning him on Haney's trail. All was silence—until abruptly another crackling and crashing sounded. This time it was Chet, seemingly as mad as Haney, pursuing a bounding, blatting, panic-stricken red calf. Phil quickly changed his course, to follow Chet. The tracks of calf and of horse were plain for a hundred yards; then both were obliterated on a flat bed of rock; nor did they appear again, no matter how closely he searched.

Phil halted Pepper, (who was perfectly willing to halt), and listened anxiously. Not a sound. He was alone. Now, what should he do?

The air was warm and heavy with the scent of the cedars. While he listened, straining his ears, motion-

less, the hum of insects arose again, jays began to scream derisively, and the claws of a squirrel rasped upon the bark as he scrambled down a pine. All this added to the lonesomeness of the situation. Phil wondered what he ought to do. Had he better wait right here, and let Chet and Haney look for him? Or had he better look for Chet and Haney? He had read that, when lost, one should stay upon the spot, and one would be found easier. But he had wandered from the spot, and now had not the slightest idea where it was!

All of a sudden his ear caught another noise—this time not so much a rattling as a rustling; but nevertheless it indicated the approach of some moving body. Hopefully he gazed; it would be either Haney or Chet; and he was about to utter a guiding “Who-ee,” when he SAW! Ambling briskly through the cedars, and now almost upon him where he had been sitting so motionless, came a big dark-brown bear between two cubs. She stopped and glanced behind her, as if apprehensive; then she started, trotting on again, toeing in, head low, shaggy and cumbersome.

Phil stared, his eyes popping, his heart in his throat. He could scarcely believe. He had a vague notion that he would let her pass; maybe she would not molest him.

She stopped short.

“Whoof,” she snorted, wrinkling her nose, peering before her at Phil and Pepper.

“Whoof!” snorted Pepper, turning head. His

nostrils flared wide. "Whoof!" he repeated, out of sides distended as if they would burst the girth.

"Whoof!" reiterated the bear, rearing to her haunches, and towering, it seemed to Phil, as high as the cedars. "Whoof!" Her teeth snapped angrily, her fur stiffened. Beside her the cubs each reared in imitation.

"Whoof!" retorted Pepper. He was trembling violently, and half crouching as though his legs were giving away beneath him, he backed, step by step. With a whirl which nearly snapped Phil's head off, and made him grab desperately at the horn, Pepper bolted.

Jump after jump, each apparently longer and harder than the last, away he tore through brush and branch, blind with fear; and Phil, ducking low upon his back, clung with both arms around his neck—a humble posture, but the most secure. It would take a fast bear to catch them—but everything that he ever had read about the fleetness of bears swarmed into his mind. On the level they could beat a horse—could they not? And this was an old she-bear with cubs! Haney and Chet must have disturbed her.

Phil's back crawled as he imagined claws ripping into it; he did not venture to look behind; he had too much to do to avoid the cedar boughs. Emerging from the timber into an open grassy space Pepper rushed, with increased speed, straight across, and on up a hill. His jumps became more laborious; and on the crest of a hill he halted, to gaze rearward, snorting, staring wildly, seeking for a pursuer.

Nothing moved. The open space was devoid of bear.

"Whoof!" challenged Pepper, panting and wheezing.

Phil patted him proudly upon the neck.

Now Phil felt that he was more emphatically lost than ever. Pepper, with the sang-froid of the dumb animal, wild or domestic, occasionally pausing to snort and look, proceeded to graze, while from the saddle his rider surveyed the land. The hillcrest was an excellent vantage point.

A panorama wellnigh bewildering in its vastness lay outspread. The hill, with grassy sides whereon flowers nodded and occasional rocks upstuck, sloped on the one side into the cedars, separated from its base by a grassy, flowery level stretch, and on the other side fell away into a valley heavily timbered with pines, beyond which a ridge of the dark green, topped with snow, shut off further view. Beyond the cedars, across the grassy space below, was a cañon or draw; and beyond that Phil saw mile after mile of flat-top mesas or table-lands, divided by little cañons so numerous and so irregular that they might have been cracks in mud after the sun has shone.

Somewhere in this direction, which by the sun was north, lay the Bar B ranch. Scrutinizing the cedars, the valley of pines, the grassy space, Phil could make out not a moving living thing. He "Whoo-eed"; and waited, and "whoo-eed" again. And for luck, a third time.

He dismounted, and with lines in hand sat down,

allowing Pepper to graze meantime where the grasses, self-cured and long, were mingled with the fresh and shorter. The sunshine was warm, the air was sweet, and from his hill-top Phil, lolling, gazed about, monarch of all he surveyed. He rather enjoyed the experience.

However, the sun was high; by its position he judged that the time must be about noon. He began to grow uneasy; if he was not going to be found (how deserted of life this great region was, anyway!) he had better be doing something definite; and that was, be getting back to the ranch, if definiteness could be attached to such an indefinite undertaking.

Yes, somewhere in that direction lay the Bar B ranch. He had no idea how far they had come—twenty miles, maybe, at least, by the sore places he had. He strained his eyes, peering; but no Bar B ranch could he make out, no, nor sign of anything human. Mesa' after mesa, separated by those crack-like draws and cañons, under the blue sky, met his vision, until they merged with the azure mountain range, far north.

He tried to figure out what a boy in a book would do under such circumstances. A boy in a book usually did the right thing. One thing that he had read and remembered was, when lost to follow the nearest stream down; it would eventually lead to a larger stream, and onward to habitations. There was no stream up here; this was a dry country, despite the melting snows. By obliquing toward the east he ought to cut Owl Creek, and he could follow that

down to the ranch; could he not? He knew that Haney and Chet and he had crossed the creek; and they had taken a general course west and south, because their backs had been against the sun. But in the cedars they had gone every which way.

Supposing that he didn't find the ranch, and should have to spend the night, still lost? Br-r-r! He had matches and a knife, and he could tie Pepper—but if a bear should come, and Pepper should run away, and he himself should climb a tree, and the bear should climb after him—that was not a pleasant prospect. It would be mighty lonesome—out in the open wilderness—after dark—with bears and wolves and what-not prowling around.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAMP IN THE ARROYO

ALL such thoughts were passing through his mind, when a mile or more away, below, on the edge of that first draw, he distinguished a speck moving. His heart leaped. That must be either Chet or Haney, or both, looking for him or homeward bound and deserting him. With a shrill prolonged yell he sprang to his feet, and waved both arms. Pepper gazed inquiringly. But the yell fell flat in the great void of earth and sky, and the specks moved on without a waver. Phil yelled repeatedly; and climbing hastily into the saddle he still yelled, and riding down at an excruciating trot, urging the reluctant Pepper, he yelled at intervals. Probably his voice did not penetrate a third the space, in the clear air distances being so deceiving.

He rode as fast as he could, hope springing in his breast, down from the hill and across the grass and through the fringing cedars; and soon he began to look sharp for tracks. This, he felt under the circumstances, was the proper thing to do. Luckily, he found them, crossing his own route; the prints of hoofs in the soft soil and the fresh scratch of a horse's shoe where the animal had scraped a log.

"Whoo-ee-ee!" yelled Phil, turning Pepper in pursuit. He had to proceed very slowly, because now

and then he over-rode the trail, as it veered; occasionally he lost it entirely, and must stop and cast about on foot. It struck him as strange that Chet and Haney did not hear him or keep on the outlook for him, or—or something. Confound them, anyway! It was pretty mean of them, to go straight along this way; never, so far as he could make 'out, even pausing to listen. Presently he lost the tracks entirely.

The trail had been skirting the rim of a deep draw with sagy bottom and sheer gravelly sides. Phil decided that as soon as he could he would descend into the draw, and follow that to its lower end, and see where he came out. He continued for some time, hoping every moment to arrive at a place where he and Pepper might slide down in. Once or twice he turned Pepper's head, but Pepper hesitated and protested as if the spot was too steep, so Phil resumed the onward march.

But now Pepper turned of his own accord where a cattle trail, narrow but packed, cut diagonally down the slope, and willingly followed it. Far ahead were the two specks, again.

"Whoo-ee-ee," yelled Phil, and urged Pepper into a bucking trot down the trail.

When next he lifted his eyes the specks had disappeared.

The cattle path slanted on to the bottom, where it dipped into a deep arroyo, emerged again, and proceeded, in what Phil intuitively felt was the wrong direction, through the draw, to the farther side. Here it terminated at a dried water hole.

And here Pepper halted. Before was a wall of rock dotted with cactus, now budded, and with bunch-grass and sage. Lizards scampered from crack to crack. From the water hole cattle-prints diverged in all directions, but there was no trail.

By the sun, which cast his shadow and Pepper's shadow slightly to the left, Phil knew that if he rode down the draw he would be riding east, which was toward Owl Creek. The draw was still and very hot. On the top of the cliff sat a great hawk, motionless, and above sailed around and around a pair of buzzards. After he had ridden through sage and weeds and scattered blades of grass for a quarter of a mile the draw broadened; and as he was rejoicing at this sign he found his way abruptly cut by another arroyo, entering with a side draw.

This arroyo was perpendicular. He tried the angle of the two, and found no descent; he rode up the new arroyo, still trying, until the draw narrowed to a cañon, and pinched out, with a steep, slippery pitch.

Baffled and feeling that he would gain nothing by continuing in this direction, Phil turned Pepper, and galloped back, retracing his way along the main arroyo. He could at least get into this by the trail which had crossed it, and following it down he would emerge somehow, somewhere.

Not until he had gone back clear to the trail was he able to enter. The bottom was soft sand, tracked by innumerable hoof-prints of cattle. The banks were almost straight, and so soft that even on foot he would not be able to scale them. He was shut in.

Pepper, with nose and ears expectant, paced amiably along, rounding turn after turn. And then, suddenly, they were right upon three men, loafing while they ate a lunch in the shade cast by over-jutting brush.

A few steps below, across from the men, a girl in dingy frock and battered slouch hat sat flat in an angle of the bank, amidst the dirt. Further on, four horses and two burros stood, dozing, unsaddled, the horses with backs wet.

All gazed inquiringly: the men with a certain furtive alertness, as though apprehending, looked beyond Phil. No one following him, they exchanged swift glances.

"How are you?" accosted Phil.

"How," said one of the men; the two, his comrades, grunted, and turning, continued to munch.

The man who had spoken had but one eye; the other eye-ball was gone. The man at his elbow appeared to be smiling; but as the smile never waned, Phil concluded, finally, that it was a set expression, as if a smile was frozen on his face.

The girl might have been pretty had she not been so grimy. But the arroyo was a dirty place, and moreover was laden with an effluvium as of decaying animal matter. Phil recalled that he had encountered a similar stench at a tanning shop, back home.

"Can you tell me where the Bar B ranch is?" asked Phil.

The man with the frozen smile deliberately dipped, from a hole about which they were clustered, a tin cup of water, and drank. Phil watched him thirstily.

"No," he said. "You from there?"

"Yes, and I want to get back," explained Phil.

The three men glanced again; and the third man arose, and withdrew down the miniature cañon. *He limped, one leg being shorter than the other!*

Phil's heart jumped and he involuntarily gasped. 'Twas the man with the limp—the left-handed man with the limp, whom he had witnessed hunting him with a revolver, in the forest, that dreadful evening! And so here they were—the three rustlers and the girl! He was right in their hands. Would they recognize him? Whew!

"Never heard of it," said the man with the one eye. "Did you?" he asked of his companion.

"No," said the man with the frozen smile.

"These are Bar B cattle, around here," stammered Phil. "A Bar B on the left hip."

"We don't care anything about cattle. Travelin' through, is all," declared the man with the frozen smile, grimly.

"Killed a wild maverick, with a busted leg, for meat, is all," quoth the one-eyed man. "What's your brand, you say—Bar B?"

"Yes; a B with a bar over it."

"Hain't noticed it," he grunted.

There was nothing cordial about the party. The girl stared, the two men surlily continued to eat and drink, the other man had mysteriously disappeared. Nobody asked him to dismount, or eat or drink, and he was glad of it.

"I suppose if I keep on down this (he could not

think of the right word) ravine I'll come out somewhere?" he hazarded.

"Suppose you will, if you ride fur enough."

"How far, do you think?"

"Dunno."

"I know. You'll——" spoke up the girl, brightening, eagerly.

"Shut up. You don't know nothin'," intercepted the man with the one eye.

"Well," said Phil, "I'll try it and see. I tried to ride on the ground, up above, but another one of these things cut me off."

Nobody answered. Decidedly, he was unwelcome, and he hoped that there would be no objection to his leaving.

"So long," he said, starting Pepper, and passing on.

"So long," said the man with the one eye, gruffly.

Before he had rounded the next turn of the arroyo he looked behind him. The girl, who evidently had been watching him, gave a quick little flirt of her hand, by her side. Phil gallantly waved back, and as he did so he glimpsed the one-eyed man spring up and stride at her. Then the turn hid the group from view.

The stench, which had been noticeable before, grew stronger to Phil as he again rode down the arroyo; when he came to the intersection of the two arroyos it assailed him stronger than ever; a number of cattle tracks turned into the passage which opened on his left, and Pepper showed an inclination to turn,

also. Possibly this was a way out, to Owl Creek; but as he hesitated the man with the limp arose from where he had been sitting, unobserved, under the bank at the second arroyo's mouth. He had a rifle in the crook of his right arm.

"Goin'?" he said, with a slight emphasis which was unmistakable.

"Yes, sir. Is this the way out?" replied Phil, much startled.

"That's one way," said the man.

"I didn't know but maybe if I turned off here——"

"Turn off nothin'," rebuked the man, roughly. "This here arroyer don't lead nowhere. You'd better keep straight on, an' if I were you I'd move along right lively, or the coyotes 'll get you. Lots o' coyotes in the arroyer."

"Yes, sir. I will," said Phil. He attempted to be jocular. "Whew," he sniffed, with a grimace. "Rather strong around here, isn't it?"

"Dead critter, is all," answered the man, carelessly. Then he frowned. "Git," he ordered. "An' don't come back again, either."

"Yes, sir," said Phil. 'Twas best to be polite. The rifle and the man both had an ugly look; the arroyo was very deep. He promptly kicked Pepper with his heels, and proceeded, looking not back, but conscious that the man was standing watching them.

Within a few yards another arroyo entered the main one—this time from the right; but Pepper passed it willingly and trotted more briskly, with ear pointed ahead. Phil decided that they were upon the

right road, because the water in the arroyo, when there had been water, had flowed in the direction for which they were heading, as evidenced by a leaning bush, now and then, and lodged masses of débris. But the arroyo to-day was as dry as a bone.

The stench was left behind. It had centered at the arroyo mouth where the man with the limp had been on guard. Turn after turn did Pepper round, but the steep, soft, unscalable banks still continued. Cattle tracks and the tracks of coyotes were quite thick; and once, at a turn, Phil caught a glimpse of a yellowish bushy-tailed form, about the size of a water-spaniel, just disappearing around the next turn. He urged Pepper, but that next turn, when circumvented, revealed nothing ahead except the usual monotony of the sand and the 'dobe and the struggling bushes of the miniature cañon.

It seemed to Phil that he must have ridden, thus enclosed by two unending walls, for a mile, and he was beginning to worry over his helplessness, and peer more anxiously at the banks, looking for any kind of a spot that promised possible ascent, when release came. A cattle trail crossed the arroyo; entering obliquely on the one hand, and slanting out again on the other.

It was a nice question to decide whether to take the right-hand ascent, or the left-hand; but despite the windings of the crooked arroyo Phil had the intuitive fancy that the ranch lay on the left, and ahead. So he allowed Pepper to climb the trail which slanted away from them, up the left-hand bank.

Pepper, snorting and willing, climbed, and on the summit halted to look about.

Phil found that they were still in a draw; but whether it was the same draw he could not tell. Even out of his short experience he was finding that there is a sameness in the mesa country. This present draw was bounded on the left (according to the sun, the northeast) and on the right (or southeast) by ledges and cedars. The cattle trail continued through it, coming in from both sides. Before, the draw appeared to close. Starting Pepper again, Phil followed the trail.

Pepper sometimes ambled, sometimes trotted; and Phil was so hot and dry and tired that he did not care what was the gait as long as they got somewhere. The draw slightly narrowed, then opened into another draw; the trail veered, and headed into a bunch of cattle—cows and steers and calves, standing stupidly, grazing in a desultory manner, lying peacefully, or walking sedately along. There were many with the Bar B brand; and Phil welcomed this sign as something friendly, at least. Others bore different brands—a J on its back, an R looked at from the wrong side, as it were, etc. Alone in the midst of these staring animals, who seemed to be preparing to take the offensive as he drew near, Phil felt uneasy; and particularly did he feel so when an enormous shaggy bull, with white face and bloodshot eyes, lowered his head, rumbled, and pawed the ground. An answering rumble sounded from the cedar ledges on the right, and another bull advanced across slowly, likewise

rumbling and pawing. Phil did not wait to see the combat; but on Pepper, who was not a whit abashed and rather seemed to anticipate chasing every animal in his path, pushed on. The trail veered, crossed the draw, and brought up in an angle between rim-rock, where another bunch of cattle, old and young, were gathered about a water-hole.

Phil found his progress barred. Then the trail had led to only the usual watering-place and he had been traveling only a box cañon! He could have cried with vexation; for where he was, now, he had not the slightest idea. The cattle in the hole waded reluctantly out as he and Pepper drew up on the edge. Pepper took a long luxurious drink; Phil wished that he might do the same, but the green scum on the water and the white stains of alkali along the borders deterred him.

In the direction whither he had been riding the rim-rock and the cedar ledges came together, it seemed, barring exit. But as he surveyed, with sinking heart, he perceived that having spread out thin, as it were, about the water hole, the trail, or another trail, reached out, skirting the rim-rock. He directed Pepper toward it, and they followed, to find that where rim-rock and opposite ledges appeared to meet was a narrow pass, with the trail precariously cutting along it. There was scarcely room for Phil's left leg, while the other hung down over a bouldered stream bed which was but a continuation of a shallow arroyo.

Having traversed this draw the travelers entered

another. Draw after draw succeeded, like a succession of loops; with Phil ever hopefully looking ahead, expecting that at last he was to emerge somewhere. Pepper trotted ever more and more confidently; and coming out into a wide, sagy bottom, speckled with cattle, he turned of his own accord into a trail which cut northward, and followed that. Nothing looked familiar to Phil; not even the snowy ridges to the south, and to the north; and while he was pondering and hoping, and wondering where he was coming out, from the top of a little rise which Pepper topped he suddenly looked down upon a creek, with ranch buildings upon the other side.

It was the Bar B. This last flat had been the one up which he and Chet and Haney had ridden, after leaving the ranch that morning. And he felt rather silly that he had not recognized it.

Only the ford remained to be achieved. Pepper surged through and hastening up the creek bank trotted into the ranch yard.

CHAPTER X

OLD JESS INSTRUCTS

THE ranch appeared deserted, save for Tom, the big cat, who lay outstretched under the bench beside the door. Halting before the hitching rail, smooth from many reins and gnawed in spots by restless teeth, Phil, stiffly dismounting, tied Pepper. Then as stiffly he hobbled in through the open door, and made for the bucket of water. It seemed to him that he would perish unless he now had a drink instantly.

Old Jess was standing by the stove, his sleeves rolled up, mixing a batch of bread on the table.

"Got back?" he remarked, casually. "Where are the other boys?"

Phil, having sucked the dipper dry, with a sigh of relief placed it in the bucket.

"I don't know," he answered. "I lost them and so I came back alone."

The feat did not seem to astonish Old Jess, particularly.

"Thought you were comin' back pretty early, when I heard the hawss an' looked out," he said. "Where'd you lose 'em?"

Phil looked at the clock. 'Twas only one-thirty! He had presumed that it must be four, at the earliest.

"Way out somewhere," he answered. "They were chasing calves, and a bear chased me."

"If you're hungry," directed Old Jess, "there's some cold beans an' pie in the closet. Help yourself; my hands are all over dough. Get a plate; tools are in one o' them drawers."

"I'll wash, first," said Phil.

"Better unsaddle an' turn your hawss out," suggested Old Jess. "That's the fust thing a cowman does: 'tends to his hawss."

"Oh," said Phil.

He went straight out to where Pepper was standing with drooping head, in the hot sun; and unfastening the cinch hauled off the saddle and lugged it beside the blacksmith-shop, where he threw it down. Then he unbuckled the throat-latch and stripped the bridle. With a toss of his nose Pepper irritably ejected the bit, and shaking himself, walked a few steps and rolled. After that ceremony he went trotting and whinneying up the lane, for the other horses and pasture.

"Here, I'll show you something," remarked Old Jess from the door, where he had been washing his hands, and wiping them. "Come along."

He preceded Phil to where the saddle was lying as it had happened to drop.

"When you take off a saddle," he continued, "the proper way is to lay it on its side—see?—so the flaps won't be curled under an' ketch when you go to saddle up again. Then you open up your blankets an' lay them across so they'll dry. A wet blanket makes a hawss's back sore; an' a good cowman is known by the condition of his hawss's back. You put your bridle

beside the saddle, or inside it, so's to be able to pick it up easy. Savvy?"

"Yes, sir. I'll remember," said Phil, abashed.

"Bueno," said Old Jess, succinctly. "You'll larn. We don't all know the same things. Depends where we're raised. Now havin' tended to your hawss an' fixin's, you can eat. Found that saddle easy to ride, didn't yuh? I've forked it thirty years."

"Yes, sir," alleged Phil.

"Not all the saddles up here are double-rigs," commented Old Jess. "Folks seem to think they're safer in the mountains. But I dunno. Down in the Southwest the center fire's the only thing. Never did try to ride a double-rig myself that I didn't get all stiffened up—an' that ol' tree o' mine has held any critter that a rope'll hold. They say you need the back cinch in ropin'! Bah! Not if yuh rope right, yuh don't. Wouldn't swap that ol' single-rig o' mine for a dozen double-rigs or the new fangled what they call three-quarter rigs, either."

Phil gladly laved his burned face (wincing as he explored the parched skin) and scrubbed his hands, and cautiously used the rough towel. He took another long drink. Goodness, but he was dry!

Then he sank into a chair beside the table, which Old Jess had set for him after all. He was tired.

Old Jess lighted a pipe, and tilted back comfortably beside the doorway.

"Bear chased you, you say?" he invited.

"Yes, sir. An old mother bear and two cubs. I don't know as they chased, but Pepper ran."

"Where was that. Up in the cedars, too?" asked Old Jess.

Phil told, as best he could, and described the meeting.

"Mus' have been over 'round Little Squaw," mused Old Jess, puffing reflectively at his stubby pipe. "Well, you oughter have roped her an' fetched her back. Cubs would have followed, an' we'd had the whole family to play with."

"Didn't have a rope," claimed Phil.

"No; an' you didn't want the bear, either," claimed Old Jess, with a twinkle in his eyes. "If Haney'd been there he'd have put a rope on her if his hawss had stood, I'll bet a hat."

Phil proceeded to demolish pie, and to reflect upon the recklessness of Haney.

"Then how'd you come out?" inquired Old Jess.

Phil told his story.

"In an arroyo, you say?" examined Old Jess, suddenly showing more interest.

"Yes, sir. Three men and a girl, and four horses and two burros. The men and the girl were eating, and had dug a hole for water."

"Can quite often find water by diggin' in them arroyos, up near the head 'specially. What brands did the hawsses carry?"

Phil, crestfallen, had to confess that he did not notice.

"Didn't notice the ear-marks, either, I s'pose," pursued Old Jess.

"No, sir."

"Huh!" Old Jess's tone expressed quiet disgust. "What kind o' lookin' men were they?"

Phil hastened to describe.

"Well, we got 'em branded, all right," said Old Jess, more relieved. "Man with one eye, man with a limp, an' man with a frozen smile."

"And a dirty-faced girl who might be pretty," supplemented Phil, eagerly.

"Jes' so." Old Jess puffed. "How far back in was that draw with the arroyo?"

"Ten miles, about," said Phil, offhand.

Old Jess shook his head, and took his pipe out to tap it. "Oh, no, boy," he declared positively. "I reckon you aren't a very good judge o' distances yet. Might have seemed ten mile, because you were in a strange country, an' lookin' a way out. Ten mile would have taken you 'tother side the divide. Besides, you got home at one-thirty. How many draws did you pass through, comin' out, before you struck the flat?"

Phil hadn't counted. Six or seven, he thought.

"Was there the wheel of a wagon stickin' out of a dried boghole, at the mouth o' the draw that opened into the flat?" asked Old Jess.

Phil pondered. He didn't think so. He hadn't noticed it.

"Well, you want to larn to notice things, boy," reproved Old Jess. "Use your eyes. Seems as though you must have been up Brush Draw—but that has the wagon wheel at its mouth. If you weren't up Brush Draw, I'm durned if I know where you

were. How far was the draw you come out of, from the ranch?"

"Five miles, about," asserted Phil, trying to be conservative.

"Brush Draw's 'bout a mile an' a half. Five miles'd bring you to Elk Draw—but Elk Draw's more like a cañon, an' ends against the rim-rock. 'Twasn't Elk Draw," argued Old Jess. He changed the subject: "There was a stink like something dead, where those men were, you say?"

"Worse than a hide factory," volunteered Phil.

"An' one o' the men—the fellow with the limp—he stood guard at the mouth o' that cross arroyo, an' advised you to go on; and none of 'em 'peared to want you to stay," examined Old Jess. "Rustlers, sure as shootin'," he vowed, satisfied. "Not the slightest doubt of it. I know the country as well as anybody, an' there ain't any such parties belong here. That was hides, an' dead critters, you smelled. Must be common meat thieves—kind that butchers cows an' sells their meat an' hides. Bah!" More disgusted than ever Old Jess spat out of the open door. "They won't last long on the Bar B range, if we ever ketch 'em. There's a law on Owl Creek that covers this varmin. But what they doin' with the girl, I wonder. Didn't know ye, did they?"

Phil thought not. And the presence of the girl was a phase that neither of them could declare upon.

With a slight grimace as his knees cracked and his tendons rebelliously stretched, Phil arose from the table.

"Needn't clear them things away," said Old Jess, who had watched him out of a corner of his eye. "I'll stack 'em up in a minute. Pretty stiff?"

"Oh, no; not especially," denied Phil, bravely.

"Um-m-m," murmured Old Jess, unconvinced, but discreetly not pressing the inquiry. "For a boy who's had the pneumony you're right husky, ain't yuh?"

Phil gamely resolved to demonstrate further.

"Is there an old rope around somewhere, I wonder, I can practice with?" he queried.

"Might be. You look in the blacksmith shop an' I think you'll find one hangin' up. Belongs to Buster, but he ain't usin' it. Too kinky for him. Why? Want to ketch something, sometime?"

"I suppose I'll have to catch my own horse, won't I?"

"You suhtinly will, at times, when there ain't nobody to ketch him for you." And Old Jess rose and commenced to clean up the table.

Phil proceeded, with a limp which he tried to conceal, to the blacksmith shop, and found the rope. It had been painted with red paint, which still clung amidst the twist.

He emerged with it into the yard, and with some misgivings which he had not anticipated, coiled it, shook out the loop, and tried to throw as he had seen Haney and Chet and the others throw. But instead of opening nicely the noose persisted in flying through the air all twisted or else in a double line with its sides stuck together—which of course renders a

noose quite valueless except as a club. There was a knack in throwing the rope, after all.

"Here, lemme show you a point or two," said Old Jess, who had been watching, with a grim smile, from the door of the house, and now advanced into the yard and to the scene of Phil's labors. "Fust place, you're holdin' it all wrong. You don't want to hold it at the hondo—that's the hondo, this slip-knot. You want to take it about a third the way along the noose, from the hondo, an' include the rope with it, too, that far. Then when you throw it the hondo swings out an' by its weight, I reckon, keeps the loop open. Mebbe you throw your mammy's clothes-line, holdin' by the knot, but out here we throw the way I'm tellin' yuh, if we want to ketch anything—and usually when we throw we do. See?"

He had gathered the rope, and separating loop from coil, with a careless swing about his head and a little flirt, had cast; the noose, flying straight and round, fell exactly upon the post at which it was aimed. Hastily flipping the rope Old Jess flipped the loop off the post; by the recoil it fell at his feet.

"Oh!" said Phil. "Did you ever punch cows, then, Mr. Jess?"

"Me? Did I—! Some forty years!" snorted Old Jess. "What'd yuh think I am—a cook?"

"Well, I've seen you cooking," defended Phil.

"Sure you have—an' you'll see yourself cookin', if you stay out in this country long," agreed Old Jess. "Everybody cooks, at the Bar B, an' I'm jes' takin' a turn at it—a little longer than common because I

want to git rid o' my rheumatism 'fore the roundup. But I'm no cook, boy. I'm plain cow-puncher, like the rest of 'em. I ain't got down to cookin' for a livin' yet."

"Where have you punched—'round here, for the Bar B, always?"

"No, sir. I was on the old Texas trail 'fore ever the Bar B was born. This ain't cow-punchin', these days. It's half ranchin'."

"Were you in Texas?"

"Now, boy, lemme give you another pointer, since you're larnin', an' it may save you trouble. Don't go into a man's pussonal history too far. Where a man come from ain't your business, nor mine. I haven't asked you where you come from, have I? There's a heap o' people in these hills whose past history nobody knows; an' a good deal of it may not bear investigatin'."

"Like those men in the arroyo," suggested Phil, trying to cover his confusion.

"Yep; like those men in the arroyo; an' like other men you'll meet 'fore you go out. A good plan in the West is to keep eyes and ears open, an' mouth shut. Nothin' brands a tenderfoot like fool questions."

"I'll remember," said Phil, soberly.

Old Jess laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Mark my words an' do so," he said. "Now, go on an' throw your rope, so that to-morrow mornin' you can brace right in an' ketch your own hawss. See if you can't git onto throwin' it over your shoul-

der. That's the only way, from the saddle; an' on foot, too, for then you don't ketch every critter in the bunch when you only want one. I use a rawhide rope, myself."

"Is it better?"

"Throws slicker, slides quicker, handles neater. Couldn't give me nothin' else. But like the center-fire an' the double-rigs it's a matter of opinion—up here. Down in my ol' country it ain't. But common four-ply hard-twist manilla is good 'nough for you, you'll find."

Coached for a minute, and left to himself as old Jess waddled back to the house, Phil found himself making slow progress. There were two ways of throwing the rope. One was to let the rope trail on the ground behind, and to cast it forward through the air; the other was to swing it about the head, and abruptly to cast it in that manner. This was the hardest for him to solve. The other way, he occasionally noosed the post (although the loop had a tricky way of missing it); but when he came to swing, and to cast with that peculiar wrist-motion, he usually missed the object about ten yards. Of course, with a side-arm motion, he could throw it like a girl throws a stone or as at home he had thrown the clothes-line spoken of by Old Jess; but from the hand of Jess and Haney and Buster and all, the noose shot as straight as a bullet, out from the shoulder. Whereas the side-arm motion, as Old Jess had criticized, included "all out-doors."

While he was zealously practicing, Haney and

Chet appeared, suddenly topping the hither bank of the creek.

"There's Smith-Jones ropin' the whole ranch," commented Haney, as they cantered into the yard.

"Where did you go?" asked Chet. "We looked all 'round for you."

They dismounted simultaneously, and unsaddled, Haney turning his pinto loose first by a full thirty seconds.

Phil explained.

"We saw that old bear, too," said Chet. "She ran off and her cubs climbed a tree and Haney tried to rope them out!"

"If the branches hadn't kep' gettin' in the way I'd a roped 'em shuah, an' fetched 'em back to yuh, Smith-Jones," informed Haney.

"Why didn't you climb the tree, and get them yourself?" demanded Phil stoutly.

"Uh, uh. Not me," declared Haney, shaking his red head, while with a redder handkerchief he wiped his face. "But I tell yuh, Smith-Jones: I'll eat raw anything *you* rope!" With this challenge he kicked off his chaps and stalked into the ranch-house. Chet imitated. Phil, following, noted with satisfaction that they, also, were stiff.

Having washed, the two proceeded to eat what Old Jess set out for them, and all discussed Phil's second encounter with the rustlers; this appearing to be of much more moment than his encounter with the bear.

After the lunch, Haney strolled out, and with a grunt of satisfaction seated himself upon the ground

with his back against the logs of the blacksmith shop, lazily watching while Phil, coached by Chet, sheepishly but doggedly renewed his roping practice.

"See—it's this way," demonstrated Chet, neatly noosing a post. But Phil only waxed more and more awkward, as seemed to him. And Haney was moved again to proffer, sarcastically:

"Yes, suh, Smith-Jones. I'll engage to eat alive an' raw anything you ketch runnin' loose!"

He reached, with negligent fingering took his own rope off his saddle, and coiled it from a small noose. Tom, the cat, at the moment, disturbed by the performance of Chet and Phil, was starting upon a dignified retreat across the yard to another and more quiet corner. From his sitting posture Haney lightly flicked his rope. It fell true, but only upon the spot where Tom had been while it was in air. As the loop opened above him, he sprang from under, and in far from dignified jumps was fleeing with stub erect and ears laid back for a clump of grease-wood.

"Will you eat cat?" queried Phil mischievously.

"I'll never eat that cat, if I have to wait till you ketch him," vouchsafed Haney, imperturbed. "See how he dodged? He's smart. Smartest puhson on the place. Knows a heap, that cat does."

"We're always trying to rope him, but he's too slick," added Chet. "I expect he's had a thousand nooses thrown at him, and never a one has touched him, hardly."

"He's got so he laiks it," asserted Haney, dreamily—now, having tossed his rope against his saddle,

leaning back with his great dusty black hat over his eyes and his worn boots straight before.

There was a sound of hoofs and Mr. Simms came riding down the lane.

"Hello," he said, swinging to the ground. "Back? I mailed your letters, son. Well, what did they do to you, to-day? Give you riding enough to hold you till morning?"

"He got lost again," chuckled Chet.

When Phil's adventures had been recited, Mr. Simms looked grave. The incident of the bear made him smile grimly, but the incident of the camp in the arroyo sobered him. Ford Dexter and Buster, the other cowboys, arrived, dusty and tired, while the tale was in course of narration, and listened attentively.

"Boys, we'll try to cover that country, to-morrow," said Mr. Simms, after supper. "But we'll be lucky if we find them. And I've some other news. Met Rankin of the Boot outfit in town, and a Reverse R man. The cattle all are coming down fine, so I reckon we'll start the roundup the first of next week. Meet at the mouth of Willow."

"Little black bull come daown the mountain,
Daown the mountain, daown the mountain——"

sang Haney, gleefully.

"We've all heard that. Give us something new," they rebuked.

"All right. Jes' as you say," responded the affable Haney.

" Out on the roundup, boys, tell yuh what yuh get—
 Little chunk o' bread an' a little chunk o' meat;
 Little black coffee, boys, plumb full o' alkali;
 Dust in your throat, boys, an' gravel in your eye!
 So it's doctor up your cinches, oil your slickers an' your
 guns,
 For it's out upon the roundup when the green grass
 comes."

This chorus ran through Phil's brain all night.

CHAPTER XI

PHIL ROPES THE BANDED STEER

"GRAY JACK is to be your hawss to-day, boy," said Mr. Simms, after breakfast, in the morning, as according to custom everybody except the temporary cook directed steps, rope in hand, to the corral. "Going to rope him for yourself, are you?"

For Phil, with Buster's discarded rope, was joining the procession. It seemed to him that he might as well begin now as later—and naturally he felt a certain pride in doing as the others.

"Haney says he'll eat raw anything Phil catches," sniggered Chet.

"Raw an' alive," promptly supplemented Haney, who overheard.

"Can't afford that," answered Mr. Simms. "Hawsses are worth sixty dollars. They're worth more than Haney is! You show him Gray Jack, Chet."

With no little nervousness, Phil stood in the corral and watched the horses jostle around and around. He was aware that Chet was waiting to see what he would do, and that the men, while busy attending to their own roping, were covertly observing him. But he shook his loop free of entanglements, along the ground beside him, and holding it at a little dis-

tance inside the hondo, as instructed, followed the gyrations of Gray Jack.

"Now's your chance," directed a quiet voice behind him. It was Ford Dexter who spoke. "Give it to him; don't be afraid. We all had to learn."

Gray Jack was running on the inner circle of the bunch; and just when he wheeled, with head high, as all jammed in turning short, Phil energetically hurled his noose. To his own astonishment it landed precisely; but it not only fell on Gray Jack's head, it slipped back upon the shoulders——

"Flip it up! Flip it up, or you'll never hold him!" cried Ford, reaching to help.

Before Phil could appreciate what he was expected to do, Gray Jack, plunging with one fore-leg through the loop, had jerked him upon his face in the mud, and ripping the rope through his hands was galloping triumphantly about the corral again, in the midst of the other horses.

Scrambling to his feet, Phil grabbed at the rope, to try to set back upon it. He might as well have essayed to hold a locomotive. Head first he plunged, and released the rope as quickly as he might a snake.

"Get up! Get up!" bade Ford, while a shout of applause came from the spectators. "You never can hold a horse by a rope around his shoulders. Neck's the proper place. Wait; I'll catch him for you."

At the touch of Ford's rope upon his neck, Gray Jack stopped instantly in his tracks. Docile, he let Ford slip Phil's rope up to the proper place.

"Take him out," said Ford, turning him over to Phil; and noting Phil ruefully inspecting his hands, the inside of which was raw where the friction of the hard twist had told even through the gloves, he commented, slightly smiling, "Rope-burned good and plenty, aren't you?"

"Gee!" exclaimed Chet. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"Not much," asserted Phil, gingerly drawing on his gloves again.

He led out Gray Jack.

"Smith-Jones caught somethin' he couldn't let go of quick enough, shuah," murmured Haney, pulling at a cinch.

"He pretty near made you eat a gray horse, just the same," remarked Ford, slyly. "If his noose hadn't slipped down."

"If the 'possum hadn't got away, Rastus'd fetched him home foh roastin'," quoth Haney.

"Yu see it's this way," quietly volunteered Buster, who, having completed his own saddling-up, stood by Phil. He untwisted the cinch, and passed it under, for Phil to grasp. "A hawss won't run on the rope when yu get him 'round the neck; but he's shore bad when yore rope gits down too fur. If the loop is big she's liable to slip, an' when yu see her doin' it, yu want to give her a flip 'fore she draws tight—or else yu want tuh leave go. Nobody can't hold a hawss by the shoulders or 'round the belly. Sometimes a hawss'll run clean through a loop."

It was quite a speech for Buster, and kindly meant; so that Phil felt that he somehow must have earned

consideration by his affair with Gray Jack. He was winning his way.

"Chet and Phil and I 'll ride up that draw Phil came out of, if we can find it, and look for that arroyo," announced Mr. Simms. "Ford, you and Buster might make a little pasear up Red Draw and around over the hill, to meet us at the Lazy J camp about noon."

"Where does Haney go?" queried Chet, as that individual waited, statuesque upon his horse.

"Up to the hawss camp to help Hombre bring the animals down."

"I'm too wild to be sent against those rustlers, anyway," observed Haney, turning his horse. "Might huht 'em!"

He rode up the lane; the rest of them crossed the creek and took the trail over the little rise and down into the wide sagy flat, cut by its arroyos.

Phil saw with a thrill that Mr. Simms and Chet each had a rifle in a scabbard slung beside their saddles. Ford and Buster appeared to be unarmed.

"Don't they have guns, too?" he asked of Chet, in a low tone.

"Oh, they got 'em, all right," assured Chet.

"Where?"

"In a Texas holster, under their blouses, hanging from the left shoulder."

"Is yours loaded?"

"Of course."

Phil sighed.

"I wish I had one," he said, enviously.

"I know where we can borrow one for you. John Abel of the Flying U has it," proffered Chet. "We'll see him on the roundup."

"All right."

"Dad took his to-day because of those rustlers, so I took mine," continued Chet. "But usually we don't carry 'em. They catch in the brush. And six-shooters aren't fashionable any more, on the cow-range, dad says. Everybody used to carry 'em. I want an automatic like Dick Vorum's. Ford has one, too."

"Let us know when we come to your draw, Phil," directed Mr. Simms, breaking into a gallop and interrupting Chet's gun talk.

Down the trail they all sped, behind them a wake of dust floating golden in the sun; bridles and rowels jingled, chaps scuffed, saddles squeaked, and broad brims flared in the breeze.

"How are you making it, boy?" asked Mr. Simms, as they slackened to a walk after the breather. "Pretty sore?"

"I was kind of sore when we started," admitted Phil. "But I'm not so any more—except my hands."

"Rope burns sure last a long while," and Mr. Simms smiled his grim characteristic but not unpleasant smile. "You'll remember them, I reckon. The best way to get rid of soreness from riding is to climb right on and ride it off—like you're doing. We'll send yuh home yet with bow-knees and saddle-corns on yuh as big as dinner plates."

"His mammy won't know him," declared Buster.

Suddenly a little wave of homesickness welled into Phil's throat. How far away his mother and father were—and how remote was home. Certainly much had happened to him in less than forty-eight hours!

Ford and Buster branched off into a narrow, rocky draw like a small cañon. Mr. Simms and the two boys kept on. Phil maintained an anxious eye for "his" draw, but to his companion's queries he could only answer with a dubious shake of the head. Finally Mr. Simms turned in, and saying flatly: "We've gone far enough. Either this is the one, or we've passed it," proceeded on up the sagy defile that opened like a side entrance into the broad flat.

"This look familiar, boy?"

But Phil could not assert that it did.

"It ought to. It's the draw Chet and Haney took you up yesterday!" continued Mr. Simms, with a trace of sarcasm.

Cattle had been sighted, through the flat, and once or twice Mr. Simms had abruptly veered from the trail and swept at a gallop, sitting the saddle as if it were a rocking-chair, across the brush to inspect. But there were no cattle in the draw and at last Mr. Simms waxed restive.

"Ho-hum," he said, reining to the left. "We can't depend on Phil, and no cattle in sight; let's climb the hill and see what's in the cedars on top."

So they climbed the slope and were among the fragrant cedars.

"Were you and Haney here yesterday?" asked Mr. Simms of Chet.

"No, sir. We took in by that little draw farther on and crossed the ridge, didn't we, Phil? On the ridge is where we saw the bear tracks."

"Yes," agreed Phil, vouching readily for that. He remembered "bear."

"Somebody has been riding through here," mused Mr. Simms. "Somebody with a hawss that isn't shod. All the cow-hawsses are shod, at least on two feet."

"Maybe it's a loose horse," proposed Chet.

"Nope," denied his father shortly. "This hawss is being ridden. He sinks too deep. Somebody's been driving burros, too. Those rustlers had burros, did they, boy?"

"Yes, sir. I saw them in the arroyo."

"Um-m-m."

They rode on, Phil at the rear with his heart thumping.

"Not much use following these tracks," declared Mr. Simms, suddenly. "They're from last night, at the latest. Chet, you take Phil and circle the mountain, and I'll meet you on the other side. There may be a lot o' cattle between us; you can ride through 'em, but I wouldn't stop to brand. Just see what they are?"

"All right. Come on, Phil. That's where the wild cattle stay. I'll show you some," quoth Chet, gleefully.

Leaving Mr. Simms to pursue his course they diverged at a right angle on theirs. As if imbued now with responsibility Chet trotted his horse briskly

through the cedars, and Phil on Gray Jack had the same difficulty of the day before in keeping up.

"You ought to wear spurs," called Chet, halting to wait for him. "These horses all soldier as soon as they know you can't spur 'em. Here, take one of mine," and he detached it and handed it over. "When Hombre comes down, I'll get him to make you a pair."

"Who's Hombre?" asked Phil.

"He's a Mexican. He's camping with the horse herd. Best Mexican you ever saw. Come on. On top here we can see some wild cattle, maybe."

They mounted a bare round rise which in any region but the mountain West would have been a very respectable hill; and at the crest they paused to survey. Below and beyond lay a stretch of country almost level, gentle in aspect, with many grassy flats and a sprinkling of trees, some of which might have been Eastern elms.

"See—there they are! That's a bunch!" exclaimed Chet, excited. "That one with his side to us, on the edge, is the banded steer, I bet. Gee! Shall we try to catch him?"

In the shade of a spreading tree at the middle of an open flat a mile distant was a group of dots. Phil could realize that they were animals—but so far as distinguishing their colors, not he. His city bred eyes failed beside of Chet's trained vision. He peered.

"They see us, too!" cried Chet. "Look at their old heads up? They're wilder than deer and twice as sharp. That old banded steer, he's the leader. He's

a Bar B steer——” and Chet spoke with the pride of proprietorship. “Come on (his favorite appeal)! Take down your rope. Perhaps we can get him between us and rope him just for fun.”

Away sped Chet, lurching down recklessly, at the same time unbuckling his rope where it hung in a coil at his saddle. And away after him sped Phil, bounced mightily by his plunging gray, and hanging to the saddle horn.

On the level he straightened up, more comfortable, and with nervous fingers began to take down *his* rope—the rope of Buster’s which he had adopted.

“There they go!” shouted Chet. “But they’ll have to turn at the rim-rock. To the right! Hurry up!”

Shaking out his rope he spurred his horse more madly; and endeavoring to shake out *his* rope, Phil, now thoroughly excited, spurred Gray Jack. Awakening to the spirit of the occasion, Gray Jack, with a grunt and leap, quickened from a gallop to a run and fairly flew—crashing through bushes, jumping unexpected little ditches and holes, swerving ’midst trees, his bit apparently in his teeth. Phil jammed his hat tighter—and was almost unseated doing it.

“Come on!” encouraged Chet, far in advance. “I see ’em! Look out when they break back!”

Into a grassy oval raced Gray Jack. The wind whistled past Phil’s ears. Oh, but this was sport! He had not tumbled off yet, and with confidence growing in him, he could enjoy himself. Chet had disappeared—but a yell drifted back from him,

"There they come, Phil!"

Out from the trees edging the park galloped three cattle, cutting in athwart Gray Jack's course. Lean they were, long-legged, rough-coated and wild-eyed. Two dodged back, but the other, a raw-boned fellow with wide-spreading horns and red body cleanly circled by a band of white, dashed straight across. Gray Jack instantly took matters to himself. Old cow-horse that he was he changed direction so violently that Phil, pitched sideways, almost was shot to the ground, and obliques for the banded steer.

"Get him, Phil! Get him!" yelled Chet, now behind, in the timber, and witnessing.

The banded steer ran with tail up, head down—and ran with unexpected fleetness, making for the trees beyond. But Gray Jack, the quarry in sight, clapping on more steam yet, lengthened himself with jump after jump, at a pace that struck Phil as prodigious. The gap closed rapidly.

"You're heading him! Look out when he turns!" yelled Chet. "Drive him this way."

Phil could see the white of the straining animal's eye-balls. The steer changed direction; so did Gray Jack, and drew closer.

"Throw, throw!" besought Chet, whom the new course had put again in the rear. "You're near enough!"

Phil scarcely knew how he did it; but he swung his loop as best he could, and erratically let it go. It sailed out in a twist like a figure eight (not the proper form at all for a loop), and fell across the

steer's neck. At the touch of it, he wheeled, slipped, shook it off—no—yes—yes—see, a half of the eight is entangled about his horns—he flipped it there himself—*he's roped!*

"You've got him! You've got him! Hurrah!" cheered Chet, thudding from somewhere, to help. "Take your dallies!"

The rope drew tight between them as now almost side by side Gray Jack and the banded steer raced along. Phil essayed desperately to wind his end—or Gray Jack's end, as Gray Jack seemed to be engineering the affair—around the saddle horn. And what next? He had hooked the fish.

"Give him slack and throw him. I'm coming," exhorted Chet.

That was it: give him slack. The rope was like a fiddle-string. Neither horse nor steer was yielding an inch. He kicked Gray Jack in the ribs, to turn him in. The rope slacked for an instant—but the steer turned also—it whipped taut with a jerk and now head-on the steer snapped it and continued into the brush. For a moment Phil saw him, head and tail both up now, trotting victoriously through the trees, his share of the rope dangling from his horns. Then he was gone.

Gray Jack stopped, and stood heaving, with ears pricked, mildly surprised.

"Oh, pshaw!" bemoaned Phil.

"Busted the rope! He's always doing that," complained Chet, arriving, breathless. "Nobody wants him, anyway. But it's fun to chase him. The boys

let him go when they do catch him. Nobody's had a rope on him for a year, I bet."

"Isn't he any good?"

"Naw! All those wild cattle are tough as leather and thin as coyotes. Sometimes we shoot 'em, when they get too many, for their hides. But only the Indians eat 'em. That steer skipped off three years ago. He must be a four-year-old now."

"How——" began Phil; but clear, although distant, was wafted to them a shot, and as they listened, another.

"Hunters," ventured Phil, in response to Chet's startled gaze.

"No. There's nobody hunting up here now," replied Chet; and added soberly: "I'm afraid it's dad. He's met the rustlers."

With sudden energy he made off again at a gallop, in the direction whence they had come; and Phil, of course, followed hard after.

CHAPTER XII

COWMAN SIMMS MEETS THE MAN WITH THE LIMP

CHET rode furiously, but Phil kept Gray Jack close behind. For he was impressed with Chet's grave intentness, and the quick action that followed; and it came to him that this might be an occasion of life or death. So he disregarded the buffeting branches and the covert pitfalls, and spurred Gray Jack on.

They reached the base of the hill from whose bare top they had discovered the wild cattle, and forcing their horses, pushed at trot and lope on a diagonal ascent. The thimble-berry bushes were as high as a rider's knee. Above, beyond them, they saw another horseman plunging at a gallop up the slope—leaning forward in his saddle, driving in his spurs relentlessly. Phil's heart gave a jump; but Chet's was the quicker eye, again.

"That's dad!" he exclaimed. And he yelled shrilly.

The figure in the saddle waved his hand once and pointed to the crest before him, and rode the harder.

"Come on!" urged Chet, as if incited by the gesture. He jerked his rifle from the scabbard, and he too rode harder, turning his horse and taking the hill-side more direct.

Mr. Simms was at the top before them, was off his horse and was crouching amidst the grass and rocks,

his rifle projecting ready for use. His left shoulder was stained red. A rent had been torn in his shirt-sleeve there.

"Tumble down," he ordered crisply.

Chet was to earth in a twinkling, and beside him.

"Oh, dad!" he gasped. "Are you hurt much?"

"No. Watch for them. They'll cross yonder."

"The rustlers?"

"Yes—but don't ask questions now."

Phil had a hundred of them on his tongue. But he imitated Chet, who obediently crouched and waited, saying not another word.

The hill-top was quiet, save for the panting of the winded horses. The sun flooded it, the sky was a wonderful blue above, below the long incline of grass and bushes fell away until it flowed into ever-present cedars. Directly before, the open pasturage extended like a wedge, cleaving a broad lane through the timber; and it was upon this point that Mr. Simms and Chet were fixing an expectant gaze.

"About eight hundred yards, Chet," said Mr. Simms, quietly. "But we can reach 'em."

Chet looked at his rear sight and adjusted it. Then he resumed his gaze. Phil's wide-open eyes wandered from the lane to Mr. Simms's red, wet, torn shoulder, and back again. It was the rancher himself who chiefly fascinated him. As he crouched there, motionless, rifle at a ready, face sternly set, hat on his eye-brows, his shoulder crimson and uncared for, Mr. Simms was the very spirit of grim vengeance. And it suddenly occurred to Phil that while Chet might

make a good center or fullback, and lacked that much of an education, he fitted in perfectly right here at his father's side.

"There they come," remarked Mr. Simms, evenly. His rifle rose to his shoulder; Chet's rose to his. A group of moving figures had emerged from the trees fringing one edge of the lane and were hurrying across. They were in the shape of a comma, the dot or head behind. Phil held his breath, for the fusillade. But——

"Wait! Wait, Chet! Wait, I tell you!" ejaculated Mr. Simms. He struck down Chet's rifle-barrel and lowered his own. "Oh, the cowards!" he berated. "The dirty cowards! They're hiding behind the girl. They've put her on this side. See her? They've spied our hawsses. We don't want to shoot a girl, Chet. Not that, boy. Let 'em go. I've a notion to pick off a burro—they're in the lead—but no. Let 'em all go. We might hit the girl, by mistake. Pshaw!"

"I could get a burro, dad. I know I could," pleaded Chet.

"I said no," reminded his father, sternly. "We'll take no chances. Well—hi, look at that! Their jacks are acting up. Good! By Henry, I'll make that fellow smell lead. No, not you, Chet. I'll attend to him."

One of the burros, with the perversity of its kind, had bolted aside and was galloping straight down the lane, toward the base of the hill and the full open. A rider left the group and madly pursued him. The

group hastened on and entered the timber again, at the farther edge of the lane. Upon this distant rider pursuing the recreant burro and its pack the attention of Chet and Phil now focused.

Chet had nervously raised his gun, but at his father's injunction had arrested its course half-way. Mr. Simms's cheek was pressed against his rifle-stock, the barrel wavered and steadied, poised for an instant, and—crack! He had fired.

The burro and the rider were bunched in a flurry as the animal was being headed and turned. Crack! Crack! Crack! Three times more in rapid succession Mr. Simms had pulled the trigger, and the rifle had spat its vicious messages.

"Give it to him, Chet, if you want to," bade the cattleman, lowering his gun with a short laugh and a grimace of pain. "Blamed if I didn't get the burro after all!"

For the rider, ducking in the saddle and whipping with his hat, was scurrying for shelter. The burro was a dot upon the ground behind.

"Crack! Crack!" spoke Chet's ready rifle. The rider disappeared among the trees.

"Well, we've got the jack, anyway," said Mr. Simms. "Don't think we touched the man, Chet. Innocent bystander was the one to be hurt, as usual. But they were so mixed up I couldn't tell."

He laid his rifle down against a rock and twisted stiffly.

"Look at my shoulder, will you, boys?" he asked. "I reckon it needs a handkerchief or something

around it, to keep the dirt out. Just rip the sleeve open."

The reaction from the excitement had left Phil all a-tremble. Chet, after staring regretfully at the timber where the man had vanished, laid his smoking rifle down, and turned to his father. The two boys bared the shoulder and inspected the wound. A raw, red furrow was cut through the fleshy part of the arm, high up.

"Gee!" said Chet; and Phil's fingers shrank.

But the old-time plainsman and rugged Westerner only smiled. "That's a good clean wound," he said. "Better than a hole. It's spoiled a shirt for me, though. Tie it up and let's be moving."

"How did it happen, dad? Tell us," prompted Chet, to the great relief of Phil who was being consumed with curiosity.

"Oh," said the veteran, stoically enduring the manipulations while they tied Phil's white handkerchief around the arm, as best they could. "I was following up the smell of hides on a fresh trail, and ran right into Phil's lame friend, the left-hander, waiting in the timber. I said 'Hello.' He said: 'This is a bad trail, my friend.' I said 'It smells bad, sure.' He said: 'Then I'd advise you to turn back. It's a mighty unhealthy smell.' I said: 'You aren't looking very well, yourself.' He said: 'You're looking worse,' and first thing I knew up came a six-shooter from the waist-band of his trousers and bored me in the arm, and he was making off as fast as he could run his horse. One of the quickest little acts I was

ever against, too. He's lightning on the draw, that fellow!"

"You had a gun, too," hinted Phil.

"Um-m-m, yes," mused the rancher. "We'll all have to carry guns, if such gentry roam the country. Even Phil, here; though I don't believe in 'em. But when you need 'em, yuh need 'em bad."

"You shot. We heard you," claimed Chet.

"Yes, I shot. But I was so surprised by the way he worked that left-hand draw on me, when I hadn't raised a finger, that I was about an hour late," explained his father. His face set for an instant, and his eyes glinted steel-blue, steel-hard. "But if ever he appears over my sights, and doesn't come down out of his tree, God have mercy on his soul. No man shall try to pot me this way, and expect me to stand for it. I've had too much powder burned under my nose for that; I'm not one o' the scary kind."

He shoved his rifle into the scabbard and painfully mounted his horse. The two boys mounted and they all rode down the hill.

The poor burro was lying upon its side, its four legs stiffly stretched out, its head extended, the pack bulging from its back. A ragged hole was in its neck, where a soft-nosed bullet had smashed through.

"Pshaw!" complained Mr. Simms regretfully. "I didn't mean to kill *him*. You boys open up that pack. I'd better stay where I am."

The burro was small, so that the boys could turn it over by the legs—a job Phil liked little, but which Chet, accustomed to life and death on the range,

mind not at all—and speedily they had loosed the pack and opened the tarpaulin cover. Within, as had been expected, although the odor was not pronounced, were a number of cowhides, dried.

“What’s the brand, Chet?” asked the father from his horse.

“All Lazy 8 but one, and that’s a TB,” reported Chet, examining.

“Caught with the goods on,” said Mr. Simms. “And botchy work, too,” he added, inspecting a hide that Phil held up for him. “Anybody with half an eye could read that brand for a re-made—but I suppose it’d pass muster where such hides go. Humph! Well, the Lazy J people got it worse than we, this haul, but like as not another pack ’ll be Bar B. These fellows must have had a cache around here somewheres, and were moving out in a hurry. All right; tie the hides on behind us and we’ll move, too. We’ve lost the cows, but we’re ahead the hides and a pack-saddle.”

They left the stripped burro, stiff and still upon the ground amidst the grass and flowers, to the buzzards and coyotes, and rode away through the cedars.

“How do you like the ‘Wild West’ by this time, boy?” inquired Mr. Simms, over his shoulder to Phil.

“Pretty well.” Phil was yet prickling with the gallop, the rifle-shots, the escape and the dead burro; and the sensation of what these very cedars might be concealing. Would the rustlers be in ambush, for

revenge? But the veteran cattleman was apparently as callous to this last contingency as he was to his wounded shoulder and rode straight on.

"There are two varmints I hate, above ground," he declared. "A hide thief and a child thief—and it looks as if we had the two in one, in that gang. I hope before they quit the country for keeps we get 'em corraled."

"When you catch them, what will you do?"

"I trust you won't be there to see," replied Mr. Simms.

And even Chet volunteered no further information.

They came out of the cedars upon the rim of a draw, and descended. At the bottom the trail dipped into an arroyo; into this Mr. Simms abruptly turned and followed it down, between the high adobe banks.

"Here's your camp, Phil," he announced, halting.

Phil's eyes suddenly widened. Sure enough! The hole for water, the charred sticks, burro tracks, boot tracks; there the three men had been lounging; across, against the opposite bank, the dirty-faced girl had been sitting. Sure enough! And he had not recognized until Mr. Simms had spoken! Plainly he had much to learn in the way of using those eyes and that brain of his.

"Aw, Phil!" derided Chet. "I bet you'd have ridden right past it."

And so, very likely, he would. But the mesa country can confuse very easily; and for many weeks Phil was constantly being astonished at finding himself in a spot unexpectedly revisited.

"The birds have flown," remarked Mr. Simms, proceeding. "So this is your arroyo, is it? Well, it's the head of Ute Draw; and that hill we were on is little Squaw Mountain. Now you know where we are. But I hadn't supposed you were in this far yesterday."

He spurred his horse up a shelving place of the bank, where Phil had not thought to go; Chet promptly did likewise; and Gray Jack followed, with a heave and a grunt, of his own accord.

Instead of pursuing on down the succession of draws, the rancher cut across, climbed the right-hand slope again, and at trot and fast walk laid a course as if he knew perfectly where he was going.

They crossed a wide reach of cedars, went sliding and plowing down a long incline of trees and soft, loose earth, and striking a single trail which gradually waxed more traveled they came in sight of the Lazy J camp—corral and log shack set at the upper end of the same sagy flat which extended clear to the Bar B, eighteen miles north.

Dick, the boyish Lazy J rider of the automatic pistol and Chief Billy episode, was alone at the camp, and was just starting dinner. The reddened handkerchief about Mr. Simms's shoulder told him that something had happened, and while the wound was being washed afresh the cattleman told him more.

"Thunder!" sympathized Dick. "When I saw you fellows ridin' in I thought you had deer or bear packed on your saddles. We'll have to get those rustlers, shore."

And this was the opinion of the other men who soon arrived: Ford and Buster, Henry of the Lazy J (Dick's partner), and a stray Flying U rider bound on down to "town."

"So you missed him, too, did you, Chet?" bantered Henry. "And what was this other boy doin'? Lookin' on, scared stiff?"

"He hasn't any gun," defended Chet, hastily. "But he roped the banded steer. We saw those Squaw Mountain wild cattle, and cut the old steer out and Phil roped him!"

The incident had been lost sight of, to date—overshadowed by the sterner excitement; but now it could be made the most of.

"Roped him, did he? Well, where's the steer?"

"The rope broke and he went off," explained Phil, modestly.

"Plumb, busted," affirmed Chet, staunchly. "It was a rotten old rope of Buster's. And then we heard the shooting and made for it. But we can show you the rope, what's left of it, on Phil's saddle—can't we Phil?"

The men gravely accorded Phil his due.

"That banded steer has busted many a rope," said the Flying U rider.

"I threw on him just by accident, anyway," confessed Phil. "The loop was all twisted." Which was the truth. But it seemed to him that the men viewed him with a certain increased respect. To rope the banded steer evidently was quite a feat—even if he got away!

"How was he lookin', Chet?" asked Buster.

"Fine as silk and as thin as ever."

"Must have come through the winter in good shape. I haven't had a sight of him this spring yet. Guess I'll ride over there some day jus' on purpose," vouchsafed Buster.

"Don't reckon he's missin' yuh much," observed the Flying U man.

"I dunno. He might," returned Buster soberly. "I was the one who lost him, wasn't I? An' I'm responsible for him. He likes to play with me, that steer does—an' when yu fellers are chasin' him an' puttin' ropes on him, yu needn't go to be rough with him. I'm trainin' him to lick a b'ar."

"He could do it, all right," averred Mr. Simms. "And I shouldn't wonder if he had. He's boss of that range."

After dinner the Bar B party saddled up; and leaving the "Lazy 8" hides (which, of course, were originally Lazy J) and taking the solitary "TB" (which, of course, originally was Bar B), accompanied by the Flying U man rode away down the sagy flat for the Bar B ranch. Ford and Buster had encountered nothing of special significance on their circle, but had done a day's work, just the same.

They rode slowly—Mr. Simms's wound was sore and sensitive; occasionally Ford and Buster dashed aside in a detour to inspect cattle. All agreed that the "cows" were coming down excellently and that the roundup might be started soon.

Turning, at the end of the flat, they crossed the little rise, beyond which, over the creek, nestled the log ranch-buildings, forded the creek, and were back again at what Phil was beginning to regard as his wilderness home.

"There's Hombre!" exclaimed Chet. "Hello, Hombre."

"Com' la va, Hombre?"

"Bueno, amigo."

To these salutations and others, delivered during the brisk unsaddling, Hombre responded gayly. He was a short, bow-legged little man, with very swarthy face, and black eyes, and white teeth constantly flashing in a grin. Plainly enough he was a favorite, and also a Mexican—and furthermore, good-natured. He had not removed his leather chaps, nor his huge spurs, and his horse was standing tied loosely to the rail. So Hombre was not to stay long.

"What's the matter? Somebody shoot you?" he queried, alertly, helping Mr. Simms unbuckle the cinches and remove saddle and bridle.

"Yes, Hombre. They got the old man this time." The rancher walked wearily and stiffly away, but paused en route to pass a hand, critically, along Gray Jack's back. Apparently satisfied that no injury was being caused by Phil's riding he continued on to his office and living-room.

"Wouldn't he use any bear's grease?" asked Phil, eagerly, of Chet. "I've some left. I'll get it. It's dandy stuff."

Chet stopped him.

"Uh, uh. He's got something else. The strongest regular old horse liniment you ever smelt. Gee, but it hurts. Wait and you'll hear him yell. But it's sure good."

"It shore is," concurred Buster, solemnly. "Best thing *I* ever tried. There ain't nothin' she won't touch. Goes right through, a-lookin', that linnymment does."

"Besides being an excellent piano polish, hair oil and tabasco sauce," supplemented Ford, with sly sarcasm.

Buster eyed him, surprised and hurt, but could muster no retort other than a dogged: "She's an all right linnymment. She's made out East at Kansas City."

"Meester Simms—how'd he get hurt?" appealed Hombre; but explanation was postponed by a sudden outburst of gasps and grunts and groans, issuing from the ranch office and swelling into a series of staccato whoops.

"He's putting some on," giggled Chet. "Glad it ain't me, aren't you?"

"She's a-workin'," said Buster, with faith.

And while Phil hearkened, awe-stricken, to the medley of ejaculations issuing from the office, Mr. Simms issued too—bolting hatless and wild out of the doorway and gyrating spasmodically at walk and leap about the yard. The men looked gravely on. Only Chet ventured applause or levity.

"By Henry!" panted the rancher, halting at last, his pangs eased, and mopping his wet, flushed face.

"I guess that dose 'll hold me for a while. But I thought my shoulder was eaten plumb off."

"She's powerful, that linnymment," murmured Buster, approvingly.

Nevertheless, it seemed to Phil that he would prefer for himself the bear's grease—a panacea not so energetic.

Mr. Simms returned, with satisfied pace, to his office.

"Ought to tie the ol' man out for wolf bait," commented the Flying U rider, sniffing. "They'd shorely smell him a mile."

"But when they got close to heem, they run, I bet," said Hombre. "Now, somebody tell me who hurt Meester Simms."

"I reckon those fellows 'll make themselves scarce around here for a while," vouchsafed Mr. Simms, pushing back from the head of the supper table, at which the topic of rustlers had been coolly but determinedly discussed. "But they'll come back. It's too easy a country to work. Maybe we'll get 'em in the roundup."

His arm appeared to be much better. The linnymment possessed virtues, if rough ones. The company stamped out into the yard, Old Jess staying in to do the dishes. In the yard Hombre smiled upon Phil and accosted him pleasantly: "You rope the banded steer, eh? Bueno! I try to rope heem, three time, an' ever' time he get away."

"He got away from us, too. My rope broke,"

responded Phil. "Then we heard the shooting, and we thought of the rustlers and went in a hurry to help."

"You come up to my hoss camp. No rustlers at my hoss camp," invited Hombre.

"All right. I'd like to, Hombre. How far is it?"

"Fourteen mile. But I bring the hosses down tomorrow, mebbe. We all go on rodeo—what you call roundup. Where's your rope? You got busted part? Eet rotten, mebbe."

"See?" proffered Phil. "But it was just an old rope of Buster's."

"Heem no good, I guess," adjudged Hombre, examining. "You tie a hondo knot? This way. Now you got short rope."

Phil idly swung the noose, in orthodox fashion, just to show that he knew how (had he not roped the banded steer?) and cast it at Tom the cat (this, he felt, was the approved ranch custom) who was sitting, back turned, washing his face after supping with Old Jess.

The circle actually fell true. Tom, startled, jumped grotesquely; and at Phil's malicious jerk the noose tightened forward of Tom's hind quarters.

A shout of applause from the spectators instantly merged into a roar of laughter. With a yowl and a squirm, finding himself held, Tom launched himself at his tormentor—and, as Ford put it, for a minute Phil's face was "full of cats."

Passing on, over Phil, Tom bounded away, stub

and body swollen with rage, for a short distance dragging the rope, but soon leaving it.

"Roped more 'n you knew what to do with, that time," asserted Old Jess, whom the noise had drawn to the door. "He won't stand for much foolin', that cat, since the coyote trap took his tail off."

This was the general opinion; and while the spectators were still rolling and whooping, in their mirth, Phil ruefully retired to count his new scratches. Maybe this had been a game put up on him—but anyway, he would in future respect Tom.

It had been another eventful day.

CHAPTER XIII

PHIL RECEIVES HIS "STRING"

"How do you like that Gray Jack hawss, boy?" inquired Mr. Simms, casually.

"First rate—except he made my back ache a little. I guess he has a hard trot," ventured Phil.

"I reckon it's the boy more than the hawss," drawled the cattleman. "Trouble is, you ride leaning a little too far back. You want to sit straight, with your spine held stiff so it doesn't wobble. That's the way *we* ride. That's the way all cowmen ride, you'll notice. Long stirrup, and straight up and down from heel to head. It's the only way to sit a saddle day in and day out. Then your back won't ache. Take the saddle full and square, and don't dodge it."

"All right. I mean to," said Phil meekly. He had thought himself quite a rider.

"Reckoned I'd tell yuh, because we haven't done any riding yet. But if you stay through the roundup you'll see some."

Phil mentioned his back, it being the least of his troubles. He did not mention the gouges in his two shins, where the stirrup-irons were remorselessly eating, nor the twin welts on his inner thighs and now as large as his finger, where the saddle seams were rubbing, rubbing; nor the crick in his knees,

which made him walk uncertainly when he had dismounted, and rise and sit with snap of joints and an effort!

No. Uh, uh. None should ever know. He observed that his companions endured all discomforts with stoicism (the horse liniment must have indeed been fierce to wring from Mr. Simms such a momentary exhibition) and he rather fancied that by complaining he would gain little. Nobody could alter conditions. Mr. Simms had done his all in telling him how to ride—and that the soreness would be worn off in the riding. But Jiminy! Those shin-gouges and those thigh-welts made him wince—particularly in the morning.

Mr. Simms's wound was healing rapidly. The topic of the rustlers was being sidetracked for the topic of the approaching roundup.

Hombre and Haney brought down the rest of the horses from the winter range, and turned them into the pasture. There were now about fifty horses together—quite an array as they bunched in the corral. Three were branded there—Haney and Buster "scotching" them up (hobbling them, with a rope, on three legs), and with a hot iron stamping on their right shoulders a Circle Dot,  the sign of the Bar B horse-herd.

While the usual riding was continued, the preparations for the near event progressed steadily. On a rainy day, of the four which intervened, all hands turned to and patched a set of panniers, and sewed them with rope—for the Bar B was to take a pack

train to the rendezvous and the Lazy J was to "run the wagon" this year. Several of the horses must be cold shod—a feat neatly accomplished by whoever was at liberty. Ford re-shod Gray Jack and Pepper, for Phil—the two having been allotted, evidently, to the guest. Moreover, individual personal equipment was overhauled. Cinches were strengthened, saddle thongs replaced, bridles repaired, stitches taken in clothing, Haney even cobbling his boots, and Buster and Chet cutting each other's hair!

Ford worried openly lest a new pair of chaps that he had ordered should not arrive in time for him to get them.

"Didn't order them from Bawston, did yuh, Ford?" commented Old Jess, as a sly thrust.

Ford blushed and let all laugh.

"Ford's havin' 'em made to o'duh—done cut 'cordin' to latest fashion at that college he went tuh," drawled Haney. "They'll come with ruffles 'round the aidges."

But Phil had noted that despite his Boston and Harvard antecedents Ford was as good with rope and horse as anybody at the ranch, and was vastly popular.

The extra saddle, which came down along with the horses, Phil found to be double rigged, and not so worn as Old Jess's, which he had been riding. Only it galled him in *new* places, and doubled his sores. Ford fitted a cap of green cow-hide, hair side out, over the horn, where it dried and tightened.

"Some men like that. They think it gives a bet-

ter grip in taking their dallies," vouchsafed Ford, admiring his job.

"Oh!" said Phil. He ventured a question. "What are dallies?"

"Some men ride with the rope-end fast tied to the horn," explained Ford. "Most of us in here don't, but we carry it in the coil, and when we want to hold an animal we take a quick twist with it around the horn."

"Take yore dallies; that's right," approved Buster. "Never ketch me ropin' with my lash-end fast 'fore I throw. Not on yore life! I want to be able tuh let loose when I have to."

"It's shuah dangerous, in the mountain country; never did it, myself, daown on the plains," averred Haney.

"What does dallies mean?" asked Phil.

"Blamed if I know," confessed Ford. "What is it, Buster—Mexican?"

"I dunno," said Buster.

"Powerful word, that," bantered Haney. "Man from college, he don't know; an' man who's never been out o' the mountains, *he* don't know."

"Do you know?" demanded Ford.

"An' red-headed puncher from Texas, *he* don't know," concluded Haney.

Anyway, the maroon hide cap looked very tasty, and lent to the saddle an air of distinction.

About the ranch itself was an atmosphere of subdued gayety, as if a holiday was near. Even Old Jess sang, while he greased his rawhide rope:

"There was Hep an' Texas an' Broncho Jack,
Jiggers an' me an' Bean,
An' we loved a gal by the name o' Sal,
A regular rancho queen.

"Oh, it's treat the cook with a pleasant look,
It's sleep in the prickly pear;
It's all day, oh, on the ro-day-o;
An' you bet you we'll be there.

Prime mover in the bantering and good nature was Hombre, the Mexican. Wherever he went he made a smile; the flash of his teeth was a veritable inspiration. Phil liked him.

"You never been on roundup, eh?" he asked of Phil.

"Never in my life," assured Phil.

"Ah, you mees it. Now you have great fun. Roundup are peeknic. All the boys get out, an' meet, an' work, an' play an' have beeg grand time. Ever'-body from Bar B go. Ol' Jess go, I go, ever'body but Tom. He stay an' keep house."

"Chet said you would make me some spurs. Will you, Hombre?" suggested Phil.

"You call me Hombre, too? All right. My name Manuel. But I never hear it. 'Hombre' he mean 'man' in Mexicano. No cara. Good 'nough for me. What kind spurs, hey. Nice, fine pair?"

"Sure."

"All right. You bet. Set 'em dimes all 'round, hey? Mebbe set 'em silver in wheel, too. You see, after roundup."

"Yes; after the roundup, Hombre, if I stay. I've got to hear from my father and mother first."

A cunning spur-maker was Hombre, and all the Bar B men wore his handicraft. His specialty was inlaying the steel with silver coins. Possessing such a pair of spurs Phil felt that he might be perfectly happy.

"What hosses in your string, hey?" queried Hombre. "You know yet?"

Phil shook his head. This point had bothered him. The subject of strings was a favorite, just now, at the ranch, and the bunk-house discussions had been long and animated. A "string," Phil had ascertained, was the allotment of "hawsses" to each man. On the roundup each Bar B delegate was to have six, and already the six apiece had been picked out. Hombre's question set him to thinking.

"What horses will *you* ride, Chet?" he asked.

"I was going to have Teddy and Flannel Mouth, but dad's given 'em to Jess," complained Chet. "So now I suppose I'll have the same I had last year—Ute and Nigger and Camel Face and Monte and Rover and old Thunder. Three of 'em are good and three ain't. Has dad given you your string?"

That was exactly what Phil wanted to be asked, and he answered promptly.

"No," he said. "Maybe he's waiting to see if I can stay."

"Aw, you want to get 'em anyway," asserted Chet. "Gee! If you don't all the horses but the old plugs'll be taken out. Come on. We'll go and see him."

Mr. Simms listened to Chet's appeal, and fingered his goatee.

"Um-m, well," he said. "Let's see. What three you been riding, Phil?"

"Pepper and Gray Jack and Red Bird."

"You might as well keep those, then; and take Medicine Eye and Bowlegs. Five will be about all we can spare. That's enough for you, anyway, isn't it?"

"Are those others any good?" besought Phil, anxiously, when he and Chet were outside again.

"Medicine Eye I used to ride. He's pretty good," stated Chet, judicially. "But Bowlegs tumbles down all the time. And you want to watch out you don't cinch Medicine Eye too tight with the hind cinch, or he'll buck, sure. He bucked me off once, and he's bucked off Buster. But he hasn't bucked for a year now."

"I got my string, Hombre," Phil was enabled to announce, proudly.

"What'd you draw, Smith-Jones?" put in Haney, lolling, whittling and waiting for supper.

"Pepper and Gray Jack and Red Bird and Bowlegs and Medicine Eye. Five is all I can have."

"Want to know!" exclaimed Haney. "When you uncork that Medicine Eye I hope I'm there to see. Bad hawss, that ol' Medicine Eye. Glad he ain't in my string."

"Why? What does he do?"

"Bucks, an' pitches, an' pin-wheels, an' sun-fishes, an' bawls, an' rares, an' runs, an' bites, an' kicks, an'

changes end, an' a few other little things, when he ain't feelin' jes' right. 'D rather ride any hawss in the herd than him, myself."

"Chet says if I don't cinch him too tight behind he's all right."

Haney shook his head dubiously. "You got him. I don't want him. No, suh. I been ridin' fifteen years, but that Medicine Eye has me plumb scaired."

"Anything the matter with Bowlegs?" inquired Phil, now alarmed.

"Bowlegs? You got him too?" Haney again shook dubious, pitying head. "Only trouble with him is when you pull on the bit he stands up an' tumbles over backward."

It seemed to Phil rather inhospitable that Mr. Simms should foist some of the worst horses off upon him, a stranger and a boy. The peculiarities of Medicine Eye and Bowlegs rankled in his mind, and he finally tentatively carried the matter up to Old Jess.

"Who's been tellin' yuh?" asked Old Jess, with a trace of a smile on his wrinkled leathery countenance.

"Haney and everybody at the bunk-house."

"They like to shoot it into yuh, an' scare you a bit. But I reckon Medicine Eye used to pitch a little, when he tuk a notion. Mebbe he does yet, sometimes. Never heard o' Bowlegs fallin' back. If he does, you want to swing clear an' let him tumble. An' if a hawss pitches under yuh, 'tain't goin' to hurt yuh. Stay with him, an' when you can't stay no longer, pick a soft spot to light on! We all get a bad hawss

soon or late, an' the cowman takes what 's given him, an' says nothin'. So if I was you I wouldn't go talkin' 'bout my string as if I didn't like it, but I'd ride it turn about, same as the other punchers, an' do my work. Can't have all top hawsses—an' you're the green man o' this outfit, remember."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAN WITH THE FROZEN SMILE, AGAIN

So they rode away to the spring, or calf, roundup —this Bar B company: Mr. Simms, the veteran and ideal type of the Western cowman; Old Jess, a puncher of the Southwest when the Southwest was in its heyday; Ford, cowboy of Boston and Harvard; Haney, cowboy of Texas; Buster, cowboy of the Colorado hills; Hombre, sunny Mexican and horse wrangler; Chet, in his shaggy chaps, and Phil. And quite a company they were, too, as they drove before them their fifty horses.

Old Tom, the great brindled bob-tail cat, was left at the ranch.

"You needn't worry about Tom," declared Mr. Simms. "He knows how to forage for himself. Nothing's going to get him if he sees it first, and he usually does. He has a nest where he sleeps, up under the roof of the blacksmith shop."

"He'll have a good time, that cat will," commented Buster. "Nobody ropin' him or botherin'."

Phil had fallen heir to the old chaps which were hanging in the bunk-house, and to a single spur which he had manufactured out of certain remains. Blankets, quilts and a wagon sheet had been found him for his bed, and with Chet's bed, also, were tied upon Red Bird's back, that horse now ambling along with

the other animals. Phil elected to ride Pepper. Chet was upon Camel Face—a large raw-boned sorrel with a humped nose and a pendant lower lip that flopped idiotically at every step.

“Is Pepper your top hawss?” with professional broadness queried Chet, as they rode.

“I guess so. Is Camel Face yours?”

“I should say not! I’ve got two, Monte and Thunder. But I’m saving my top hawsses for some big circles.”

“I’ve got two, too,” decided Phil. “Pepper and Gray Jack. It’s Pepper’s turn to-day, though, so I’m riding him.”

The way to the roundup rendezvous, where all the cow outfits of the district were to meet, for the Bar B led down Owl Creek, following a rude wagon trail that with occasional detours took the general course of the stream. Through sage and greasewood and over gravelly swells the Bar B company pushed steadily on, the horses spreading out and snatching hasty mouthfuls of herbage as they passed.

Chet and Buster and Phil rode behind the herd, driving; the rest of the party rode before, leading.

“That ol’ white mare, she’s the or’nery one o’ the bunch,” quoth Buster. “She an’ that colt o’ her’s—A-a-a-a—what’s the matter with yu!”

For the white mare aforesaid, with her colt trotting beside her, had again turned into a draw opening into the flat, and with a dozen other horses following her guidance was perversely trotting off up a trail. The defection being on Phil’s flank he was away in-

stantly, to head the truants, and glad of the opportunity. Chet came pounding after.

Up the draw galloped the errant band, led by the old white mare, and with no spur required Pepper pursued keenly—for there is nothing a ridden horse enjoys more maliciously than chasing a free horse! Phil swung Pepper against the slope, to cut in ahead; Chet, behind, took the other slope. All raced furiously through the brush.

“Hi—turn ’em! Stop ’em!” yelled Phil, seeing a man sitting upon a horse, on the trail before and below. But the man made no movement, save to edge aside as if to give passage. However, the sight of him made the fugitives slacken and hesitate for a moment, guiltily; and Phil, dashing by them, waved his arms and turned them. The old white mare went trotting back down the draw, and the other horses tamely trotted in her wake.

Following them, Phil heard an angry voice and found Chet in sturdy hot dispute with the stranger horseman.

“You did! You did it on purpose!” was accusing Chet. “We might have been chasing those hawsses yet.”

“Now, sonny, hold your temper,” retorted the man, coolly. There was a cynical, amused smile on his face. “How’d I know you wasn’t jest runnin’ hosses for exercise. I make it a p’int never to interfere with no man’s actions. You’ve got your hosses. So shut up and foller ’em or you’re liable to have more trouble.”

He continued to smile.

"But you heard me yell at you," now accused Phil, arriving. "And instead of helping any you drew one side!"

"If I did then I must have thought you wanted me out o' the way," drawled the stranger, still smiling. "I'm deaf in one ear, sometimes."

He glanced at Phil shiftily, aslant, and spat tobacco juice, smiling with a sneer and an amused contempt. He wore ordinary store clothing and looked like any transient—perhaps a horse-buyer.

"I believe you'd have been glad if those horses had got away," declared Chet, who when his blood was up feared to say or do nothing. "Where'd you find that horse you're on?"

"Don't get pussonal, sonny," advised the man, his smile more sneering. "I found him easier than you'll find yours you were chasing if you don't take up their trail purty sudden."

"Oh, I know you!" suddenly exclaimed Phil, who had been studying the man's profile. "I met you in that arroyo——"

"Here comes Buster," said Chet. "He'll——"

"You know nothin'!" snapped the man; and he had wheeled, had plunged spurs into his mount, and was galloping up the draw.

"Halt!" screamed Chet.

"Halt!" exclaimed Phil, excitedly.

But their combined cries were disregarded, and the man, at his headlong pace, disappeared.

"What's the matter? Who's yore friend?" de-

manded Buster. "An' why didn't yu trail close after them hawsses? They'd have cut over an' gone plumb back to the Bar B if I hadn't come in on 'em!"

"That's one of the rustlers! He's the man with the frozen smile I saw in the arroyo," informed Phil.

"He is!" And Buster impulsively started his horse with a jump; bending forward, at a tearing run he, too, sped away up the draw and in a cloud of dust turned a curve just beyond. Presently he came loping back.

"Out o' sight," he said. "Must have taken to the hills, an' we can't corral him, now. What'd he do to yu?"

The boys explained, as Buster set a rapid gait out of the draw to rejoin the line of march.

"Shore he was lettin' those hawsses by," agreed Buster. "More hawsses runnin' wild in the brush, better for him. What was he ridin' himself?"

"A blue hawss, with a diamond on the left shoulder and a bar of vent under it."

"No ear marks?"

"Uh, uh. Was there, Phil?"

"Nope," supported Phil.

"Sounds like one o' Jordan's hawsses," mused Buster. "He's got a blue and that's his brand; diamond on the left shoulder."

"When I asked him where he found that hawss and Phil recognized him, he made off like lightning," asserted Chet. "Didn't he, Phil?"

"He sure did," supported Phil, in approved Western parlance,

"Mebbe he bought that hawss, then; and mebbe he didn't," reasoned Buster. "That bar o' vent don't count, if he's a rustler."

The word that Chet and Phil had encountered the man with the frozen smile passed from rear to van of the Bar B cavalcade, and excited no little quiet comment. On the whole the wish was that the rustlers would stay in the district long enough to be caught and disposed of. As for the man with the frozen smile—what was he doing up in that draw, anyway, unless trying to keep out of sight of travel? The riders discussed it.

The march continued, Buster and Chet and Phil resuming the rear—the two boys with the air of having earned their posts. Noon passed, and there were no symptoms of a halt. In the midst of the hot brush and gravelly mesas the wagon trail branched; the party took the left-hand fork.

"That other road goes in to Carbine," informed Chet. "Where we get our mail."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed Phil, disappointed. "Maybe there's a letter or something for me. How far?"

"Five miles. But we can cut over from the camp. Ford'll go over to-night, I know, for his chaps. He'll get all the mail, or we can."

"How big a town is Carbine?" asked Phil, curiously.

"A store and five or six houses and a bunk-house."

"How many people?"

"Forty-four."

"Forty-five," corrected Buster. "School teacher's quit Jordan's ranch an' moved into town, now."

Phil's inclination was to laugh at Buster's application of the word "town"—but he didn't laugh.

"Last time I was in I see one o' those auty-mobiles," continued Buster, gravely. "It had come clean from Denver, an' was goin' on over into Utah. Carryin' some men lookin' for oil. She was red. Fust one I ever see. S'pose yu've seen lots of 'em." he added, to Phil, deferentially. "An' 'lectric street cars, too!"

"Well, rather," said Phil. "I ride in them every day."

"Yep. I understand all kinds o' things without head or tail are running locoed so thick in cities that people get killed right along," alleged Buster. "I shore am scared o' them. Forkin' plain hawsses out here where I got plenty room to mill 'round is good enough for me."

"Buster has never seen a steam engine, yet; have you, Buster?" declared Chet.

"Never have," admitted Buster calmly.

"Never seen a railroad train?" inquired Phil, amazed.

"No, sir; heard an engine whistle onct; sounded like a wolf howlin'. Some day after I get paid off I'm goin' over to the Junction, though, where the trains come in, an' mebbe get on one an' go down to Denver. But I reckon I wouldn't like it. I ain't never been out o' the hills an' I'm used to plenty o' room. Carbine sort o' crowds me; an' last time I was

up to Oro—there's three hundred people up there!—to a bustin' contest, I thought I'd sure smother 'fore I got out."

"I've been to Denver with cattle; that's a big city," said Chet. "And I've been to the stock show there and dad and I went to a theater. I never was in an automobile, though."

"Ford Dexter, he's from Boston," pursued Buster. "He an' me ride together, an' I've found out a lot about city life from him. He says there's nothin' in it—an' *he's tried it*. But I'm sure goin' to have a ride on a steam train 'fore I cash in. I'm goin' to see one, anyhow."

"There's the roundup camp! I see the wagon!" cried Chet. "And Pete's come. He's the best roundup cook we ever had. But he's cross, so you want to watch out. His bread's fine, though! He's got his fire going, already."

CHAPTER XV

THE ROUNDUP CAMP

BEFORE and at one side could be seen amidst the sage the tarpaulin top of a wagon, and near the wagon curled into the air a bluish spiral of smoke. A shrill whoop broke from the riders, and a figure near the fire waved his broad hat. The horse-herd was turned in, and went trotting across past the wagon; the riders stopped beside it. "Hello's" were exchanged. Then Haney and Hombre galloped on; the others dismounted.

"We'll hold the ropes," volunteered Chet. "Come on, Phil. Make a corral."

Two ropes were fastened to a convenient bunch of greasewood which stood fully six feet, and stretching the ropes at a wide angle the boys each held an end. Back came the horse-herd; and on their flanks Haney and Hombre, skillfully directing them between, and into the angle.

"Shake the rope and they won't run against it," called Chet, across.

Phil shook, the leading horses recoiled and turned as if it were a snake. A very slight barrier was this rope—but to the horses it was a thing which could burn and throw and choke, and they zealously avoided it.

From the outside the loops of Mr. Simms, Ford,

Buster and all darted over the crowded heads, and one by one the animals carrying the bedding, etc., were pulled forth and led away to be unpacked. Red Bird, with Chet's and Phil's bed upon him, was included, much to Phil's relief, who saw himself and Chet helplessly anchored.

The beds were dumped upon the sage, haphazard.

"All right," called Mr. Simms, unsaddling. "You can drop the ropes, boys."

The horses, released, slowly straggled, and the pack animals, with shake and snort, stalking a few paces into the sage, each proceeded to roll. Hombre, who had hastily changed mounts, came riding, and starting the herd off, drove them at a trot.

"There goes your hawss, Smith-Jones," announced Haney.

To his chagrin and surprise Phil, suddenly recalled to business, beheld Pepper with saddle on, and dragging his lines (his nose pointed to one side that he might not step upon them), calmly trotting away, with two or three unsaddled brothers, after the herd!

"Aw, Phil!" derided Chet. "You ought to have tied him."

Phil was aghast.

"Catch him, somebody," he implored. "Whoa! whoa!"

In his chaps he clumsily legged after.

"Run him daown, Smith-Jones," remarked Haney. "Then next time you'll tie your hawss when the herd's around. Nobody's got time to help yuh. Everybody's tihud and hongry."

But Hombre, hearing the laughter and Phil's shouts, looking back, saw. He waited; as Pepper passed him, his rope shot out. Phil, shambling joyously on, seized the bridle lines.

"Much obliged," he said, grateful.

Hombre flashed his white teeth in his sunny grin, and continued after his charges.

Phil led Pepper back, and unsaddled. And thenceforth he was always careful, when the herd was in sight, to tie his saddle animal loosely to a clump of brush, as did the others.

"Let's pick out our bedding-places, first thing," proposed Chet. "Where it's smooth and flat; but you don't want to get in Pete's way, or where a night-hawk'll step on you."

The boys trudged hither and thither in the brush, and finally decided upon an open space, comparatively open and level. Phil was for a snug hollow where grass had matted, but Chet opposed.

"Naw," he said. "*You* can sleep there, if you want to, but I sha'n't. You'll be as cold as the dickens. I'm going where it's high and dry. That hollow draws frost and the grass gets damp under you, too."

So they chose a bare, hard location on a little swell or miniature mesa, fifty yards from the wagon; and they lugged their beds to that, as token of their claim upon it.

The others of the party had been quietly filing upon their bedding-places, also; for a comfortable bed is a valuable asset on the roundup.

The roundup camp was upon the banks of Owl Creek, here wide and sluggish. Opposite was the mouth of Willow—a creek, now dry, issuing out of a draw of the name. On the camp side the sage and greasewood flat stretched away and away; but across the creek was a rougher country of mesas, their fronts, intersected by draws and cañons, sweeping east and west in an irregular semicircle. They were sparsely wooded with cedars and piñons, and sage dotted their gravelly, whitish slopes like currants thick upon the surface of a pudding.

Cook Pete was an extraordinarily long, lank individual, with a shrewd Irish face, likewise long and lank, shaded by a hat whose wide flapping brim was the most pretentious that Phil had yet encountered. The hat Pete never voluntarily removed, so far as Phil could make out, during the roundup. Pete also sported an apron of white oil-cloth, which at the present moment was clean and whole, but which day by day waxed worse and worse, labor worn, until at the close it was only a rag.

Pete had dug a trench eighteen inches deep, and four feet long by three wide, and in this had made a fire. A huge coffee pot was already steaming in a hot niche, and here and there were other vessels sitting—several of them being iron kettles with heavy iron covers, flat and rimmed.

The Bar B party, first to arrive on the grounds, loafed about, lying and sitting, and watched the busy Pete, who was mixing dough on a board at the back of the mess wagon.

"Guess you fellows are pretty hungry," volunteered Pete. "Didn't have no dinner, did you?"

The men hesitated.

"Swallowed a fly that got bogged down in my throat," remarked Haney. "But reckon I could eat somethin' moh."

"I'll hustle up an' give you supper early, then," said Pete. "I'll put this batch o' bread to bakin' an' have two or three messes so if any of the other outfits arrive late, there'll be plenty left."

"No hurry, Pete."

"Take your time, Pete."

"Sure; we can wait."

"Got plenty wood?"

"Here—I'll fetch some water. You've enough to do."

There were polite expostulations from all. Buster plucked the ax from the log where it was sticking and chopped lustily. Haney seized a couple of pails and tramped down to the creek. As King of the Kow Kamp Mr. Pete accepted all attentions, and continued his dough mixing.

Having finished, he moulded the dough into biscuits, and with the biscuits lined the bottom of one of the iron kettles. He took a shovelful of coals from his trench, deposited them at one side, set the kettle thereon, picked up the cover with a hook and carefully lowered it into place, and upon the cover poured another shovelful of coals, which were retained by the rim.

Then he left the bread to its baking; and Phil, who

had been observing the proceedings with much interest——

“Know what that is, boy?” asked Mr. Simms, interrupting his thoughts.

Phil shook his head.

“That’s a Dutch oven.”

Pete glanced, astonished.

“I’ve heard tell there was to be a tenderfoot at the roundup,” he said. “Reckon this is him, then, if he don’t know a Dutch oven!”

“When he’s eaten a few batches out of them he’ll be trying to buy one of you, Pete, to take back home with him,” asserted Ford, flatteringly.

Pete grunted acknowledgment, and lifting the the cover of the Dutch oven at work upon the bread, peeped within.

“Let’s bed down before it’s dark,” proposed Chet, abruptly. And followed by Phil, he returned to their bundles of bedding.

The tarpaulins were spread out. The blankets and quilts were placed upon, full length, and then doubled back to the head so that they formed a pocket, bed size, folded at the foot (“Make up with your feet to the wind,” instructed Chet); the free half of the canvas was brought back over the whole, and the edges tucked in.

“There!” appraised Chet, with professional satisfaction. “Bet we sleep warm. Want to have just as much under you as over you. Can’t make a bed up good in the dark.”

When they approached the wagon again Haney

was drawing out a piece of new rope from a bale therein. Spanning off what he wanted, he cut it. Seated, one of the other men was tying a knot in a similar piece.

"There's your chance to get a rope," prompted Chet. "Your old thing's no good."

"Yes, Smith-Jones. Never can make me eat raw meat, 'less you have a new rope," alleged Haney, with his customary readiness.

"Except cat," put in Ford, quietly.

"Draw the line on cat," answered Haney. "How long you want it, Smith-Jones? My size is thirty-five feet. Reckon mebbe you throw forty-five or fifty."

"Thirty-five's enough— isn't it?" appealed Phil, uncertain.

"Regulation foh boy an' man," assured Haney. "Here you are. Tie youah hondo an' frazzle youah end an' go 'out an' ketch me a steer. I'm hongry."

Supervised by Ford and Chet, Phil tied his hondo knot for the noose to run through, and tasseled the other end—stopping it with twine to hold it from further unraveling.

"Somebody give him a hawggin' string, now, an' he'll be fixed," remarked Haney, seating himself to complete his own rope.

"You can untwist your old rope for your hogging string," suggested Chet.

"What's a hogging string?"

"It's to tie a cow's feet together when you've thrown her. *You* know," informed Chet, with a su-

perior air. "Reg'lar cotton clothesline 's the best, though."

"Now stretch it from the wagon to take the kinks out," instructed Ford.

Which Phil proceeded to do.

Into the grounds entered a second outfit—The Lazy J (☿), three men (Henry, Dick and a companion), and twenty horses. And by the time the sun was within a half hour of the western mesa, the other outfits expected had arrived: the Open A (A), the Reverse R (R), the Flying U (U), the Triangle Cross (Δ+), one man from each, with his string. The Three I (III) and The Boot (B) outfits would be added later, when the roundup had ascended into their country.

The men lounged about, in the shade of the wagon or amidst the brush, whittling, chaffing, exchanging news and views—and at the same time observant of Pete, so busy with fire and coffee-can and Dutch oven. "Come an' get it!" on a sudden bade Pete, stridently, above the enticing sizzling.

"Come on," prompted Chet; and needing not to be urged further, if at all, Phil, following the example of the others, from a box took his "reloading tools" of steel knife and fork and tin spoon, cup and plate, and making the rounds of ovens and coffee-can helped himself to everything. In the slanting beams of the low sun they sat or squatted, all, and supped, too occupied to talk.

Steak, canned corn, canned tomatoes, fried potatoes, bread, coffee, condensed milk, sorghum—ah!

"Fall to it, boys," encouraged Pete, affable host. "Plenty more while the chuck lasts. Any you fellers want some peaches? I'll open a couple o' cans if you do."

This, the first meal of the roundup camp, he intended should be a good one.

"When we get started an' I know where I'm at, I'll try *pie*," he volunteered, perspiring but satisfied. "See there's a lot o' dried apples come with the stuff."

"You'll give us all the gout, Pete," said Ford, appreciatively. And Pete grinned with pleasure.

"I suppose we'd better choose foreman. Those hawsses'll have to be night-hawked, or half of 'em will go trailing back," remarked Mr. Simms, the meal being finished.

"Who's out with 'em now?"

"Hombre."

"Where's that day wrangler! Thought we had a hawss jingler."

"Hasn't turned up yet."

"Who is he?"

"Some kid Henry here found."

"Said he'd come. That's all I know," defended Henry, unruffled. "Folks live at Oro. Wants to be a cowboy."

"Have to put Chet back at wranglin'."

"No, Chet thinks he's graduated," smiled Mr. Simms, grimly.

"Might keep Hombre at it."

"He might do it if we paid him enough. But he's

no thirty dollar jingler. He's too good a roper to be put herding cavvy on the roundup."

"Well, wait a day. That kid'll likely turn up."

"Of course the fust spell at night-hawkin' falls to the tenderfoot." The speaker uttered this casually, but everybody glanced slyly at Phil.

"You bet," said Pete.

"Well, boys; who's to be boss?" reminded Mr. Simms.

"You and I'll go into town with Ford," proposed Chet to Phil, beside him.

"We haven't any horses. Shall we walk?"

"Walk? Oh, gee! All that ways—four miles? Nobody walks in this country. We'll catch some horses when Hombre brings in the herd. The night-hawks have to get theirs."

"What's night-hawk, anyway?"

"He's the man who stays out at night, herding. We always have to herd the horses at night, for a while, until they're used to keeping together. Some always try to sneak back to the home range, at first. And we have to night-herd the cattle, too, when there isn't rim-rock to hold 'em, or they're wild."

"Will I have to?" asked Phil.

"Sure. We all take turns. The foreman says who. Maybe he'll put you and me out together."

"Who is foreman?"

"I don't know. I'm going to vote for Old Jess."

"Your turn, Chet," prompted one of the men, good-naturedly. "Who's *yore* boss?"

"Jess!"

"That settles it. Jess is elected. He can't put any of us night-herdin', because we all voted for him!"

"Except Phil. He didn't have a chance," announced Chet.

"Yes; 'cept yore friend, there. He'll have to do all the night-hawkin' for the camp."

But Old Jess (whose appointment as boss seemed to be satisfactory) disposed otherwise.

"I'll take the job, to-night, boys, till one; and Dick can spell me then. We'll let the tenderfoot have a good sleep, to start on."

"Hombre's bringin' the hawsses. Guess he wants supper," informed Pete.

The rope corral was stretched again. From the herd Old Jess and Dick and Ford picked out horses; Chet roped Ute, and as Phil was holding an end of the corral, Dick roped out Gray Jack for him.

CHAPTER XVI

PHIL UPHOLDS THE HONOR OF THE BAR B

NOBODY else was disposed to go into town; through the soft twilight Ford and Chet and Phil rode away up the wagon trail, to get Ford's chaps (if the chaps had arrived) and Phil's word from home (if *it* had arrived) and whatever mail might belong to the camp.

Chap-accoutered, jingling into town with Chet, also chap-accoutered, Phil felt very much the cowboy. All three dismounted at the rail before the general store, and loosely tying their horses beside of others standing there, entered—Phil striving, under the open stare of three or four men and boys at the doorway, to walk with bowed knees and toes in as if to the range-saddle born.

"Yore chaps are here, Ford," greeted a clerk.
"Came last night."

With Phil looking on anxiously, Chet was receiving the mail.

"This telegram must be for your friend, I reckon," vouchsafed the postmaster and storekeeper, handing it out. "They sent it over from the Junction by the stage two days ago, but I knew you'd all be down at the roundup."

"Oh, pshaw!" said Phil, taking it eagerly. "I wish I'd known."

His tone of chagrin and astonishment over this naïve explanation drew a snigger from the onlookers loafing at the threshold and within. He did not notice, but tore open the envelope, and ran rapid eye over the contents.

His dubious mien changed. Waving the paper he executed a brief war-dance.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "It's all right. I can stay. They say: (and he read) 'Stay there if you prefer. We are willing. Will write.' Isn't that swell! Now I'll have my baggage sent back to the Junction."

And seizing Chet he waltzed him about the store.

"It's shore fine," declared Chet, broadly, and grinning. His reply was genuine, but Phil's exuberance seemed to grate upon some of the hobbledehoy and ranch boys standing by.

"It shore is," they mocked.

"His mammy says he can stay."

"Ain't that fine?"

"Goin' to have a reel Chicago dude all summer, Joe."

But Phil was too enthusiastic to be annoyed by such by-play. "Now I want some boots," he announced. "Sevens, please. And I need a couple of bandannas, too; and a pair of heavy gloves. And a flannel shirt. And some socks and a hat, and other stuff. Got any spurs?"

Glad enough to replace the things of Chet's that he was using, assisted by that individual and attended by the derisive, sniggering comments of the other onlookers, Phil made his purchases. He paused

to admire Ford's new chaps, and then leaving Ford and Chet inside, talking with the clerks, he went out to tie his outfit (as much as he was not wearing) to his saddle.

His tormentors followed him with their persistent attentions.

"Say, Chicago dude! Lemme wear them new boots, won't yuh?" called one.

"Why?" asked Phil, waxing restive under the nagging.

"Want to be reg'lar cow-puncher—wow!"

"You can wear my boots if you'll let me wear that face. I want to join a side show," retorted Phil. "Or if you need them bad, you can have my old shoes that I threw away."

There was a burst of laughter; but the chief tormentor doggedly returned to the attack.

"Say, Chicago dude—does yore mammy reely say yuh can stay a while?"

Phil did not answer. He tied on his packages.

"Ain't yuh 'fraid you're overloadin' that hawss?"

Phil did not answer. Having unfastened Gray Jack's lines from the rail he proceeded to mount.

"Look out! He'll buck!" cried his tormentors, in simulated alarm. "He ain't gentled to Chicago dudes."

"Kin you ride at a trot, mister?" demanded the chief of them. "Aw, watch him—he's pullin' leather sittin' still."

Little pieces of dirt, and pebbles and chips began to fly in Phil's direction, but under the irritation he

sat without responding, now and then checking Gray Jack, whom the missiles fretted.

Ford and Chet emerged.

"Say, Ford; lemme wear them new chaps?" queried one of the galaxy.

"Yes, if you can take them off of me," returned Ford, promptly. His offer was not accepted and he and Chet and Phil rode away.

"Shooting it into you?" asked Chet.

"Yes," said Phil. He had been growing angrier and angrier.

"Hey, Chicago dude! You're afraid to come back," sounded the challenge behind—as if after due deliberation.

It seemed to Phil that this was just what he had been waiting for. Without one instant's hesitation he wheeled Gray Jack and went galloping back the few rods to the rail. He dismounted, tied his horse, and walked straight to the group at the store doorway, who were receiving his action in sheepish silence.

"Here I am. What do you want?" he demanded.

"You dared him, Buck. Now talk up to him."

"You told him to come back. What you goin' to do about it?"

"He's called yore bluff."

Thus admonishing, the group pushed to the fore a stripling ranch lad, who with an insolent swagger grinned in Phil's indignant face. He extended a bottle.

"You forgot to take along this soothin' syrup yore mammy sent yuh," he said.

"Chuck!" Phil's fist flew out and over went Smarty. Furious beyond any calculation as to odds of strength or numbers Phil piled on top. There was a vigorous struggle, as the boys rolled and twisted over the dusty ground.

"Give 'em room," exhorted voices, as the crowd, gathered about the twain, jostled and opened and closed again.

"Keep off, you other fellows! Let 'em have it out. Your man began it," warned Ford.

Chet, half-jubilant, half-fearful, his heart with Phil and his fingers itching to take part in the mêlée, beside Ford shoved to the front and peered excitedly. The horses at the rail pricked their ears.

The two figures, at close grips there upon the ground, writhed and struggled and panted and grunted. The ranch boy was the stouter, but Phil was the quicker, and madder. Up they rose, grappling; they locked and swayed and down they dropped together, with a thump.

"Stay with him, Phil!" encouraged Ford.

"Yuh got t' do it," affirmed a new friend.

"Aw, Buck!" scoffed the chorus.

"Want any help, Phil?" queried Chet, breathlessly, ready.

On his back Buck was kicking and squirming with wild convulsive efforts. Twice—thrice he raised himself and Phil together clear of the ground, from heel to head. But Phil, having secured his hold, clung like a bull dog, with knees and hands pinioning the arms, elbow athwart under the chin, and body weight-

ing down the chest. Buck's squirming ceased, and he lay, exhausted.

"Ready to quit?" gasped Phil, glaring into the face close underneath his own.

Buck nodded.

"If I let you up you'll leave me alone, after this, will you?"

"Sure," croaked Buck.

"All right."

Phil sprang clear. His enemy sat up and dabbled at his mouth, exploring his teeth.

"Say, but he hit me an awful belt!" he averred, to the grinning circle.

"You need that soothing syrup more than I do, now," quoth Phil, bluntly, tossing the bottle at him; and taking his hat from Chet he walked with Chet and Ford to the horses.

"'Rah for the Chicago dude!"

"You're 'all right!"

"Good for the kid!"

Such hearty sentiments followed him.

"Well, son, you upheld the honor of the Bar B that time," spoke Ford, as they again rode away through the golden gloaming. "Hurt you any?"

"Naw," answered Phil, and honestly. "I tried not to give him a chance."

"I'm awful glad somebody took that Buck down," said Chet. "He's too smart. He shoots it into every new person that comes. I bet Phil won't have any more trouble there."

"No; he's made good in Carbine," agreed Ford.

The fracas and the new chaps shared the attention of the camp, where the men were clustered about the fire, before turning in.

"We'll have to vote Phil a medal, won't we, for standing up to that smart Aleck gang?" proposed Mr. Simms. "They're more than Chet ever tackled."

"Don't fight, myself, Smith-Jones; I always run," alleged Haney. "But I do love a natural fighter; an' you suhtinly are a scrapper. Don't you evuh get after me!"

The camp went to bed. Snugly extended between his blankets and quilts and tarpaulin, with his trousers and coat and vest under his head for a pillow, and his new cowboy boots tucked away to keep the frost out of them, Phil blinked up at the myriad stars blinking down. A yard from him Chet was similarly lying, and around about through the brush were lying in same fashion the men all, the cook underneath his wagon. The fire fitfully flickered; at a little distance the picketed horse of Dick, whose watch at night-hawking was to come later, stamped and sighed; farther in the gloom a coyote yapped. Already somebody was snoring.

For a few minutes Phil blinked at those wondrous many bright stars and thought. The great open was now friendly, much more friendly, it seemed to him, than when on that first lonely night he had faced it in the darkling timber. He was comfortable—comfortable in body (housed by his cowboy bed) and in mind, which reviewed his new outfit, his telegram, and his victory over the aggravating "gang." He

was glad that he had had the spirit to turn back, at the challenge, and whether accompanied by Ford and Chet, or not, to assert himself. He was glad—he was glad—he hoped that Medicine Eye wouldn't buck with him—he would ride Gray Jack, anyway, to-morrow—he—he—and suddenly he, too, was asleep, so soundly that he did not hear Dick awakened at half-past twelve to mount and to go trotting away, nor hear Old Jess come in.

The fire ceased its flicker, and it, also, slumbered; and over the peaceful roundup camp the endless stars steadily drifted in their eternal nightly march.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BIG CIRCLE

PHIL awakened to a shrill yelp. Above him now in the paling expanse of sky flared only a single great star, like a rear-guard posted by the departed host. Amidst the brush chirped small bird-voices. The canvas of the chuck-wagon loomed cheerily, thrown into high relief by a blazing fire. The strokes of an ax sounded with staccato sharpness, and the lank figure of Pete the cook, topped by the tremendous hat, was outlined in silhouette against the glow as he wielded the tool. Over the sage hung a mist, and through it spectral forms were seen sitting and rising, half-clothed, as if a resurrection was occurring.

"Whoop-ee! Everybody up!" came a yelp again, from the fire, where one or two other figures had joined the cook's.

Phil hastily threw off his covers and crawled out. Chet was doing the same. Frost had gathered upon the tarpaulin and upon the edges of the blankets and quilts. Phil shivered as he pulled on his trousers, and yawned again, until it seemed to him that his stiff face was cracking. Chet also yawned, audibly. He stood; Phil stood; they donned coats and hats, and with a mutual grunt of greeting stumbled through the brush to the fire, and added themselves to the

group already (careful not to impede the cook) warming their backs.

Throughout the sage the resurrection continued. There was joking, yawning and pulling on of garments. The east, changing from gold to pink, deepened rapidly, and the brush and the scattered beds were plain. Ravens croaked hoarsely as they flopped across the brightening sky, outward-bound upon their day's foraging. The boys seized opportunity and the tin basin and towel and soap, and descended to the creek to wash. They returned to find the company all assembled and the soap in demand.

"Come an' get it," bade Pete, who had been lifting the covers from the Dutch ovens, here and there about the fire, and investigating.

Rattle of tin, as prompt hands extracted from the mess-box the eating utensils; a circuit by everyone from pot to pot, sticking, spooning, pouring; and presently a squatting and a sitting as everybody proceeded to breakfast. While they were eating the sun appeared over the mesa to the east, and comfortably warmed them.

"Cook won't bless you, boy, if you give him a messy plate like that," observed Mr. Simms, as Phil, arising with a sigh of fullness, passed him by, to deposit his dishes with the others.

Phil paused, alarmed. It was impossible for him to swallow another mouthful. His plate *was* "messy," for he had helped himself to more stuff than he could get away with. He noted other plates. Haney was engaged in polishing his with a piece of bread; so

was a stranger cowboy. So was Chet. It was evidently the custom, and for a reason. The cook was king. He had plenty to do without having complications in his dish-washing. Phil sat down, and cleaned his plate—eating the scraps and polishing with a bit of bread, like the others. Thereafter he was careful not to help himself beyond his utmost ability.

“Cavvy’s comin’,” announced Old Jess, peering eastward and shading his eyes. “That Mexican’s right on time.”

“Yes, Hombre’s a good wrangler,” asserted Mr. Simms. “He went out himself and relieved Dick.”

“Have to keep him at it to-day, if that kid don’t arrive,” muttered Old Jess. “Then we’ll pick up somebody else. If Henry’s kid doesn’t show ’round by night, he needn’t show ’round at all.”

“Give Phil the job,” remarked the cattleman.

“Humph!” said Old Jess—which might have indicated anything.

Going to his horse, which was standing saddled where he had left it upon coming in, and which was pricking its ears at the tinted dust rising over the sage eastward, Dick rode out to meet the incoming herd. The men lazily watched and waited, and digested.

“Guess I’d better heat this coffee up. That Mexican’ll be good an’ ready for some. It’s sharp this mawnin’,” murmured Pete, moving the big pot to the coals again. “He was up ’fore I was.”

The herd was near—galloping, trotting, biting and kicking, the white mare and her colt in the lead,

streaming on athwart the brush. The men about the fire stood, stretched, and scattering to their saddles, took their ropes. Phil imitated. Two of the men held the rope corral, and Hombre and Dick cleverly turned the herd in. The corral was jammed with horses—squealing and nipping and shoving from the outside for the inside. The men, ropes ready, circuted, alert to throw.

Phil was nonplussed. Occasionally he glimpsed Gray Jack, as the mass of animals churned and milled, but he never dared to cast. There were so many heads all in motion!

"Anybody want a hawss? I got two at once, here!" announced the Triangle Cross man, plaintively.

"Nearly got somethin' by the leg, myself," returned another rider. "Come out o' there, you!"

"Anybody see a little bay with a '76' on his hip?" asked a third. "Can't find him, myself."

"He's there. He come with the rest," called Hombre, from a cup of coffee and a heaped plate by the fire.

One after another, and two and three at the same instant, the curling ropes flew in over the herd with a whizz, the loops snapped upon unwilling necks, and the horses were dragged out and led away to be saddled.

"What you lookin' for, boy?" asked Old Jess, his own horse in hand.

"Why, Gray Jack. But I can't get a chance at him," said Phil, in despair.

"Hold this animal o' mine, an' trade ropes with

me. No—put your loop through mine, from behind, an' over his head; this way. Then the other fellow doesn't have to pull his rope through yours. Now I'll yank your Gray Jack out, I reckon."

Old Jess coiled his rawhide, and scanned the heads.

"I see him," he said. He whirled his rope, beligerently, and stepping a few paces shot it forward and over. With wicked swish the smooth heavy braid flew like an arrow. Old Jess jerked taut, and grunted satisfaction.

"Here comes your hawss," he announced, pulling. Sure enough out burst Gray Jack.

Phil gladly traded ropes again, and conducted Gray Jack to saddle and bridle.

"Come on, Phil! Watch!" cried Chet. "Henry's going to uncork a horse.

"Give him room, boys," cautioned Mr. Simms.

"Yes, give us room. This hawss 's liable to need it," panted Henry, of the Lazy J, tugging at a cinch, while Ford held the bits.

The men near him led their horses aside. Everybody respectfully watched. Henry "rocked" the saddle, and finding it to his liking gently gathered the lines, and as gently inserted his foot in the stirrup. The horse, a small roan with a big "K Bar K" (K—K) showing on his flank, stood perfectly quiet, but in a peculiar attitude of straddled legs, as if braced under the saddle—or as if sleepy.

"Aw—I don't believe he's going to do anything; is he?" delivered Phil, bluffly.



THE ROAN JUMPED, STIFF LEGGED, BACK ARCHED, HEAD DOWN.

"With his back humped like that? Gee! You wait and see," reproved Chet, out of his superior knowledge.

Henry suddenly swung into the saddle. With a single motion he was there and firmly seated, lines held high.

"Let him go," he said; and Ford sprang away. For a moment the roan stood, motionless, as if dazed; then, while the spectators yelled their delight, with a convulsive start forth he jumped, through the brush, stiff legged, back arched, head down, bawling and grunting.

Henry's hat soared high and floated to the ground.

"Pick it up, somebody," he besought, "'fore it gets stepped on."

"That hawss ain't buckin'," declared the cook. "He's about all in, this quick. There he goes——"

For under the jabbing of the spurs the roan, abandoning his dancing on his toes, broke into a run, and with great leaps went scouring across the flat.

A keen whoop of pleasure drifted behind, as Henry welcomed the change; and away he sped.

"Never did know a roan that wouldn't peter out," remarked Foreman Jess. "All over, boys. Anybody else got a hawss to uncork? Well, let's get started. Day's 'most gone an' nothin' done yet!"

"Savin' my hawss, till I get stronger," said Haney, mounting with easy, negligent grace. "But you-all wait till Smith-Jones uncorks Medicine Eye. When you goin' to ride him, Smith-Jones?"

Phil did not think it necessary to answer. Haney's

allusion was too serious. For Medicine Eye did act up—even Chet admitted that.

“When some of you get a real bad hawss you want uncawked turn him over to me. I’ll ride him,” boasted Pete the cook, whose cow-puncher blood seemed aroused.

“Hi! There goes Chet!” exclaimed Mr. Simms. “Nigger’s frisky this morning. Didn’t suppose *he’d* need any uncorking.”

Jumping like any billy goat was Chet’s horse, with Chet riding gallantly, albeit tugging at the lines.

“Don’t lift his head. Have it out with him,” ordered his father. “Scratch him. Don’t be afraid.”

So while the men cheered and Phil watched anxiously, Chet let the lines lax, and sitting his best, spurred roundly.

Nigger quit, received a meed of applause; Chet, perspiring, red, grinned. Phil, wishing that his own test was passed, almost envied him.

Not without a little thrill of uncertainty he proceeded to board Gray Jack. He felt that he was covertly being observed and estimated—and evidently on this frosty morning there was no telling what a horse might do, the example having been set. But Gray Jack stood staid and firm.

Henry came loping back from his run, and took his hat without comment. His adventure was ancient history.

“I guess we’ll try to clean up east o’ the creek to-day, boys,” quoth Old Jess. “We’ll drift them cattle over, an’ start ’em on, the first.”

And he crisply apportioned the country, sending the men off two by two. Phil and Chet waited.

"You lads can come with me," said Old Jess, finally; and he rode out. "We'll take Cottonwood Cañon, ourselves."

"Gee! That's eighteen miles," ejaculated Chet.

"If you can't ride it yuh can stay in camp an' help the cook," proffered Old Jess, with sarcastic directness.

"Naw! You bet I can ride it," declared Chet. "Can't you, Phil?"

"Sure I can," asserted Phil, endeavoring to fit his feet into the stirrups so as to avoid those same old gouges in his shins.

"It's the big circle of the day; isn't it, Jess?" declared Chet.

"I reckon," answered Old Jess.

Heading out across the wide expanse of sage and greasewood he obliqued from the creek, and approached the mesas. Along the base of these ran a wagon-trail; and, trotting, he turned upon it.

Trot, trot, trot, they went, Chet and Old Jess before, Phil behind. Trot, trot, trot, over the winding road, which, now rock, now thick with dust made gray by the alkali, wound interminably on, up hill and down. Buster and the Triangle Cross man turned off, into a draw. Ford and Henry turned off. Now left to themselves, Old Jess and the two boys trotted on.

Old Jess did not seem disposed toward chatting; his mind was upon reaching his destination. He and

Chet occasionally stood in their stirrups and rested hands upon their saddle horns; Phil did the same. Trot, trot, trot; with the sun glaring down and setting the mesas to shimmering, and the dust rising easier and easier, and the saddle (at least Phil's saddle) waxing hotter and hotter. Trot, trot, trot—a steady plugging pace that was worse than the fat chief had made, because over the hard road and in the dust and alkali.

Trot, trot, trot. A hard taskmaster was Old Jess. Phil groaned to himself and shifted in that saddle which he was polishing so incessantly.

They left the road and entered a sagy draw flowing down between mesas with precipitous rim-rock sides. Through the draw trotted Old Jess, and presently turning chose the steep dry bed of a stream that must at times be a raging torrent draining the mesa. Up this passage he forced his horse, Chet and Phil following; and slipping and scrambling upon the water-worn ledges and boulders they emerged at the summit. Phil never would have believed that a horse could have climbed such a course.

Now they were on top of this mesa. Pausing while the horses panted for breath, Old Jess, gazing at the view spread southward, said:

"Want to see where you got off the train, boy? There it is—that saddle yonder."

"To the right of that snow-peak, you mean? Away off there?"

"That's the divide where the railroad crosses."

"How far from here, Jess?"

"Hundred miles."

Phil stared. It did not look so far.

Old Jess dismounted and tightened his cinch. The boys tightened theirs.

"You two clean this mesa and the flat the other side," he directed. "I'll meet you where you come out."

He went trotting off, along the mesa's western edge.

"All right. Come on, Phil. There are some, over in the cedars," and Chet, spurring Nigger to a gallop, was away, too.

They raced easily through the brush. Seeing them coming a number of cattle resting in the shade of a clump of cedars raised their heads to watch. As the boys drew near, out the cattle bolted, half-wild, resentful at the intrusion. Steers and cows and several calves they were, crashing from the cedars into the open.

"Head 'em across. There'll be a lot more, and we'll leave these and drive 'em all down together," instructed Chet.

So they gave the little band a good start along a cattle trail winding in the right direction; and left them. The cattle halted, dully gazed behind them and around; and proceeded mechanically on again, as if, their peace having been destroyed, they might as well keep moving to another asylum.

It was good sport, hunting the mesa for cattle. Here and there the boys galloped, all in the clear, fragrant air of the flat table-land, in rivalry to see which should succeed in routing out the larger bunch.

The mesa evidently was a favorite resort, for it was well cut with trails, and the ground among the cedars was trodden hard. Once, in the sage, Phil almost rode upon a little calf so sound asleep, curled in a ball, like a dog, that he shouted at it to awaken it. It opened its eyes, sprang panic-stricken to all four legs, and staggering from its nap ran blindly and confused, blatting for its mammy. In the distance she answered; with "ma-a-a!" and "moo-oo," the twain met—baby to claim refreshments, mother to nose for possible injury.

All the mesa had been ransacked, and it seemed scarcely likely that any animals, even a tiny calf asleep, could have been missed. In several strings the ousted cattle were trailing along, across the mesa, and gradually converging. Phil and Chet followed, riding "straight up," as befitted masters of a herd, vigilant to turn in stragglers whose minds still clung to these local haunts; when the paths became one they had quite a bunch before them: steers, cows, heifers, calves, and a great white-faced bull; all-colors and various brands.

The trail dipped over the edge of a mesa and ran obliquely but abruptly to a wide flat below. So over the edge plunged the cattle, and crowding, slipping, in a cloud of dust patiently continued on.

"Don't hurry them," cautioned Chet. "Let 'em take their time."

In the parching wake of the mass down they, too, finally plunged.

The flat was dotted with other cattle, quietly grazing; the mesa projected into it with a high point.

"You go around this side and I'll go around the other," directed Chet. "We've got to drift them all this way."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SIGNS IN THE ARROYO

THEY separated. Gray Jack, pricking his ears at fresh conquest, loped willingly again, and Phil pressed to make a circuit behind the furthestmost animals. What an arroyo barred his way! At least twenty feet deep it was and almost the same in width. With impatience he skirted it, seeking to cross. The cattle beyond were gazing at him. Some were liable to make off. In desperation he sent Gray Jack at a slightly shelving spot, and headlong they slid down, landing recklessly but right side up.

Now they were in, and the question was, how to get out again! High towered the gray dirt walls, mottled and streaked with the white of alkali. They trotted briskly through the defile, over the soft bottom tracked as usual by cattle. Horsemen—or at least horses—also had preceded him in this arroyo; their hoofs were mingled with the cattle hoofs. Suddenly Phil's eye, roving from side to side in quest of an ascent, caught sight of a stick hanging like a skewer to the right-hand wall. It bore tied about it a small rag; he sidled Gray Jack to it and reaching high, pulled it out.

It was a straight stem of brush, with larger end sharpened. The rag was tied to the smaller end,

and looked like a fragment of a white handkerchief—woman's handkerchief, by the fineness of it.

Examining it, Phil rode on; and presently he came to another skewer, similarly adorned; this was almost beyond his grasp, but standing in his stirrups he managed to jerk it loose.

Then the thought occurred to him that these might be signs put there for a purpose, and in tampering with them he was laying himself open to a reprimand. So he stuck both skewers back into the dirt. He passed another of the tokens—but it was higher than he could reach, and he wondered how it got there. Perhaps these were water levels when the arroyo was half-filled with water! Then men in boats had set the skewers, like stakes. Why? And here, next, was a skewer much lower, opposite his knee. He did not touch it. The white rag hanging from it certainly was from a small handkerchief, for it was the corner thereof and bore the letter "C."

Phil jogged on, anxiously seeking an exit. In a few moments he noted, scratched in the adobe on the side where he had been looking for more of the skewers, a rude arrow pointing in the opposite direction, and beyond it a "P." Further along he passed an "L," and next an "E"; at a longer interval an "H"; and if there were more letters he missed them, for he discovered none.

← P L E H

Humph! What sense was there to such a combination? And, anyway, he wanted to get out of this

confounded arroyo, and to gather these cattle. That was his business, as a cowboy.

The letters had ceased, but he encountered curious hieroglyphics; first a , which he tried to read as a Cross brand; and then a , which might be a watering-pot nozzle. He passed the remnants of a camp-fire—evidently antedating the last rain, for its ashes had run. It might have been the fire of the party who had made a survey through the arroyo, and had left those symbols. Maybe this arroyo was to be used as an irrigating ditch! Perhaps oil prospectors—the ones seen by Buster in the red automobile, in “town,” that time,—had been in the arroyo.

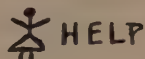
At any rate, here finally was a trail out; and gladly abandoning the arroyo and its mysteries they clambered up, to emerge into the open again. Phil eagerly looked for Chet, and beheld him already en route, obliquing onward across the flat with a new bunch of cattle. So he himself must hustle; and spurring Gray Jack to a gallop he circuited his own contingent, to weave back and forth in their rear and shout and urge. They made their trail, themselves, crossing the arroyo lower down, at an easy pass, and continuing through the brush to join their fellows. The three bunches—Phil’s, Chet’s, and the one from the mesa,—coalesced made quite a little herd.

Cows moo-ed, calves maa-ed, steers clashed horns, the bull bellowed, the dust of sage and of alkali hung in a pungent stinging cloud, and drifted back upon the nostrils of the boys an acrid, nauseous odor, once breathed, never forgotten.

"What is that?" demanded Phil, wrinkling his nose.

"Wild onions they've been eating," informed Chet. "See what I found?" he said; and trotting over from his flank he handed it to Phil, and trotted back again.

It was a skewer like those of the arroyo, and bore instead of a rag a bit of folded brownish paper inserted in a cleft at the smaller end. Phil opened the paper and saw:



roughly and uncertainly drawn as if with a burnt match or a piece of coal.

"Found it sticking in the sage," called Chet, from flank to flank.

"Where?"

"Oh; over there, where I was riding. Right near a bend in the arroyo. Throw it away. I don't want it any more."

Phil pondered over it. "What do you suppose it means?" he queried. "Some joke?"

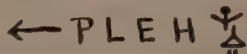
"Don't know, don't care," answered Chet. "Get along, you old fool of a mammy." He thwacked a loitering red cow with his rope-end.

"That arroyo's full of things, too," declared Phil, as his share of news. "Some sticks like this are sticking in the walls, high up, with rags instead of paper fastened to them; and somebody's been scratching brands and letters in the dirt."

"What brands?"

"I couldn't read them. But there was an arrow, and the letters P L E H, and then two signs—like this. I'll show you."

With a pencil stub on the envelope of his telegram, held against his chap-sheathed knee, Phil drew his diagram thus—stopped short by the envelope's edge:



"Say!" he ejaculated, with sudden light, perusing his work. "My two signs make that one of your's!" He rode over. "See, it's a picture of a girl, cut in two in the middle."

"Look like Injun drawings," vouchsafed Chet, examining. "That's the way the Ute signs painted on the rocks up above the house look. But mine said 'Help'; yours doesn't say anything. Just P L E H. Huh. Maybe that's a Ute word."

"Oh, shucks!" cried Phil. "I'm on to it! What do you know, Chet? That's nothing but 'help' spelled backwards. 'H-E-L-P' and P-L-E-H! I read it from the wrong end."

"Aw, gee!" derided Chet. And now an idea burst on him, also. "I bet you that girl the rustlers have did this! She wants to get away!" He reined short. His face was very earnest. "She threw this stick into the sage, with the paper on it, and she stuck those sticks *you* saw, and left those signs——"

"And the arrow to show which way she was going!" supplemented Phil, excited. "We ought to follow her and rescue her." He wheeled Gray Jack.

"We sure ought," agreed Chet. "But—this paper's

been out four days. It's got rained on. The last rain was four days ago—in the afternoon, you know."

"I saw a camp-fire in the arroyo. It had been rained on, too," said Phil. He held his horse. "Shucks!" he deplored.

"There's no telling where they are, now. We met that man with the frozen smile away back, on the trail, remember. So I guess we'd better keep on with the cattle," decided Chet, gravely.

Resuming their positions they reluctantly pushed onward again with their drive.

"There's Jess," announced Chet. "See him?"

Ahead, in the rolling expanse of sage, a solitary horseman was holding another bunch of cattle. The boys' animals, sighting their kind, quickened their pace slightly.

They blared, and those before answered. The bull, hearing a rival, rumbled menacingly, and fain would pause to throw dirt. Phil daringly whacked him with the rope.

As the distance lessened, Phil was gratified to note that his and Chet's bunch was the larger.

"You did pretty well, didn't yuh," commented Old Jess, inspecting critically, as the two bunches joined. "But you got somebody's old milk-cow, there. What'd you fetch her along for? Get out o' there," and riding in he separated a red and white animal from the rest and turned her back. "Run her off, or old Mrs. Jones'll scalp yuh bald-headed, sure."

Rather shamefaced Phil chased the persistent beast through the brush (Gray Jack enjoying the sport) and

left her convinced that she was not wanted, but protestingly mooing. He overtook the drive, which was again moving onward.

From this side and from that, entered other riders, with their bunches; Ford and Dick, Buster and Henry, Mr. Simms and the Open A man, and all, bringing their gathers, until finally, uniting with a last bunch held and waiting at a spot before, the whole was together.

"Might as well cut 'em out right here," quoth Old Jess. "Go ahead, Ford; you an' Henry."

While the others kept the circumference of the uneasy herd the two rode through, back and forth, right and left, eying sharply and constantly forcing some cow or steer to the edge, where it was instantly headed out into the open. Some were willing to be sent trotting off. But some were determined to get in again; and everybody was busy blocking their return, and giving short chases. Moreover, animals from the herd were always breaking away, unauthorized, and must be turned in. It was feverish, impatient work under the hot, parching sun, in the midst of the alkali dust—but Phil liked it. His station bore its share of responsibility; he was a unit in the field. One of the white-faced bulls came walking out. He gallantly charged it; and instead of turning, it fronted him with red eyes and rumble, and pawed defiance. Gray Jack swerved, and balked. Phil, taken aback by the burly opposition, scanned the bull rather doubtfully.

"Better let him alone," shouted voices. "You're liable to get in trouble."

"Let him go, Phil," agreed Chet. "He's mad, and he ain't afraid of anything, then."

So Phil, accepting discretion as the better part of valor, withdrew his opposition. The bull, rumbling sullenly, slowly turned and went shouldering through the mass seeking his rival.

"All out, I think," stated Ford, his nimble mount weaving here and there, while Henry, at ease in the saddle, cast an eye over the array of backs and flanks.

"There's a thunderin' big maverick in yon," he announced.

"We'll brand her when we get on down. She's a Seven D cow. I brought her in. Her grandmammy's 'round somewheres, too," said Old Jess. "Found 'em 'way up on the mesy. They range 'tother side the mountain. All right, boys."

Leaving behind the discard of animals whose brands indicated that they belonged hereabouts and were not to be shoved up with the main body, the drive resumed its course once more.

"That hawss of Ford's is the best cutting hawss in the country," declared Chet, proudly. "Did you see how he stuck to a cow?"

"What's his name?" asked Phil.

"Lonesome. Ford can show him a cow or calf in a bunch and turn him loose without saddle or bridle and he'll bring it out himself! Every time! He's a dandy. Ford did it once on a bet. I saw him. They always get Ford and Lonesome to do the cutting, if they can."

It was a long, hard drive. Already Phil was tired.

He had ridden miles, up hill and down—trotting, galloping, walking; his lips were cracked, his throat was husky with alkali and raw with shouting. Enveloped in the dust, and the reek of wild onions and perspiration from the herd before, forming with Chet the right tip of the crescent of riders, he pressed on. Burning was the sun. There was no breeze, no water, no lunch. More and more perverse waxed the cattle. The whitish dust covered their backs. Their tongues hung out and they panted. Wearied, wobbling little calves lagged, almost unable to stand, bawling for their mothers and refreshment; and the mothers were constantly lagging, also, looking anxiously for their babes. Steers fretfully horned one another; the two ponderous bulls waddled heavily, the fight effectively taken out of them. At the rear the riders shouted and scolded and whacked, using their reserve nervous force to the limit. The herd was literally being shoved onward. Phil would have been glad to tumble off his horse, into the sage, and lie as he struck. But he kept his flank in motion, regardless. It had to be done; and he ruthlessly brought his rope-end down across the tottering black-and-white youngster who was always under Gray Jack's forefeet.

For the law of the range admits of no partiality.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BRANDING OF THE BIG MAVERICK

Now into another road, stretching onward and onward, sometimes skirting a hill, sometimes traversing only the flat, monotonous plain; always hot, always parched, always powdery, moved the drive, and toiled along; cow, calf and steer rebellious at the stress which they could not understand, horses fretting, riders ever urging, man and beast alike enveloped in a common cloud of dust fummy with alkali and perspiration and the rank wild-onion breath. The afternoon sun streamed quartering under the broad hat-brims, into the riders' eyes.

The leading cattle, lowing hoarsely, broke into a lumbering trot; and presently the whole herd was pressing at its best speed, stringing out more and more as the stronger forged to the front, the weaker fell behind.

"There's a water-hole yonder," informed Chet, thickly, to Phil. "Head 'em off!"

But as he and Phil, and other flankers, spurred their jaded horses in sudden circuit, Old Jess forbade.

"Let 'em go!" he shouted. "Can't hold 'em. No matter. It's far enough for to-day."

Obliquing from the road, through the brush labored the herd, at gallop, trot and walk, taking its own

course; and the horses also kindled. For water in the desert is life.

The foremost cattle crowded into a stagnant, white-rimmed pool, and speedily a mass of the animals was shoving and struggling for space to plunge hot, dry nose into the tepid fluid, for long, greedy gulps. The van having halted and no impetus being given by the tyrants who had so relentlessly driven, the middle and rear also halted. Calves dropped in their tracks and lay panting; others instantly fastened upon their mam-mies and took refreshment then and there; and immediately the brush was a spectacle of resting travelers, too tired, the most of them, to graze. The favored ones remained luxuriously knee-deep in the pool, blissful and blinking.

"A couple o' you men stay 'til we brand that maverick, an' the others of yuh can go on to camp," said Old Jess.

"Phil and I'll stay," announced Chet, promptly. "Shall we, Phil?" he asked. "There'll be some fun."

Phil nodded.

"All right," he agreed.

If any "fun" was to be the outcome now of this most onerous day he assuredly did not want to miss it. But, wow! He was limp and wearied and didn't much care whether school kept or not!

"Don't we give the horses a drink?" he asked.

"They won't drink that stuff after the cattle have riled it up so. I don't believe they'd drink, anyway, until they're unsaddled."

Chet dismounted; Phil did likewise—and stood on

numbed feet, with crooked knees. Gray Jack and Monte drooped their heads and dozed.

"Look! Haney and Jess are going after the maverick! Ford's bringing her out."

The majority of the riders had taken the foreman at his word and were trotting away. However, Ford had stayed, along with Haney; and whether this was a reflection upon the ability of the two boys who had so promptly responded to the demand, nobody delayed matters to argue.

"That'll do," directed Old Jess, when the victim, an overgrown rangy red yearling, had been edged into an open space.

He and Haney were attending cautiously; and now the Texan's rope sailed out, to drop its loop neatly over the dazed animal's head. Continuing on Haney took up the slack. At the tautening the yearling awoke. Back and forth she surged, like a great fish hooked. She bawled madly; she leaped and kicked. In his saddle Haney grimly sat, and to her frantic jerks gave no inch.

Old Jess, watchful as a hawk, followed her motions, his rawhide loop swishing as he swung it, his horse keeping an equal distance. Around and around lunged the angry heifer, thus suddenly annoyed into renewed strength, bawling hoarsely; around and around pursued Old Jess.

"Kick!" he derided. "Kick! The higher yuh kick the better."

His slim noose shot out and downward, and with a flipping motion he jerked, reining back sharply.

"Got her, all right!" declared Chet and Ford.

"You bet I got her," affirmed Old Jess, his wrinkled, grimy countenance revealing a certain satisfaction. "Only by one leg, though."

The heifer was in a most uncomfortable position. Stretched by Old Jess' rope her leg, well elevated, extended behind; stretched by Haney's rope her neck extended straight before; but still she fought gamely (gallant young creature!), balanced between the two tethers, and pulled in opposite directions, but refusing to fall.

"Swing her," called Haney.

"Break her leg," objected Old Jess. "Rope's too low."

"Doin' all *I* can," averred the Texan.

"M-maa aa-aa!" bawled the unhappy heifer, half choked.

"Whoop-ee!" giped the spectators, keen to the predicament.

Ford, dismounting, darted in, and seizing the helpless animal by the tail, with a violent tug, while the boys cheered, hauled her sideways, and down she thumped, overpowered but never conquered.

"Better snag that other laig, somebody," called Haney, as he and Old Jess, straining back from their saddle-horns, held the animal prostrate but by no means quiet.

"I will!" volunteered Chet, eagerly.

"Let Smith-Jones. Time he was broken in. He ain't earnin' his pay," quoth Haney. "Take down youah new rope, Smith-Jones."

"Get on your hawss, boy," bade Old Jess, impatiently.

"Throw me your loop, Phil." And Ford adroitly slipped it over the heifer's two hind legs, as Old Jess eased up sufficiently. "Take your dallies—wrap the end around the horn—pull the rope tight and your horse'll keep it so. He knows."

"Yes. All you got to do is to set straight an' look laik you were enjoyin' youahself 'stead o' bein' half daid."

The big maverick, stretched by the Texan at one end and by Phil (who, thus promoted, felt that at last he was almost on a par with Chet and the other cowboys) at the other, was helpless. Old Jess, seeing that Gray Jack, with Phil on his back, was holding the two legs securely, grunted and descended from the saddle, leaving his own rope lax. Ford was making the fire; and soon the red vagrant was given the mark of respectable society.

Releasing her they all rode away—Phil, with the air of a veteran, coiling his rope, which had thus been initiated.

Unexpectedly to him they hove in sight of the wagon, beyond the creek; abruptly the little company put spurs to their horses and away they went, yapping like Apaches, in a wild cowboy race; Phil, taken by surprise, plugging along in the dust of the rear. They splashed recklessly through the ford, and still at hard run bore down upon the camp, where Pete the cook was grinning from under his broad hat at the sight. They pulled up sharply, and while their horses

were yet on the haunches they tumbled to earth, loosened cinches, shed chaps, and were at ease.

The camp, left to the guardianship of Pete all the day, had visitors. Phil recognized several of the Carbine group, encountered the evening before; among them was Buck. A little tremor of apprehension passed through him; but he loosened Gray Jack's cinch, doffed his chaps, and approached the wagon to seek *his* ease. He felt that he had earned it.

The visitors looked upon him curiously; several nodded.

"There he is, Buck, if you want him," remarked one, slyly.

Phil hoped that there was to be no more trouble; he was so tired. But as Buck leisurely arose he stood his ground.

"How," said Buck, gruffly, eyeing him.

"Hello," said Phil.

"Not mad, are yuh?"

"No. It's all right, is it?"

"Sure," declared Buck, flushing. "Shake."

Phil, very gladly, and much relieved, shook hands.

"You'd never have done it, if yuh hadn't hit me so sudden an' knocked me over," defended Buck, seating himself again, and composedly rolling a cigarette.

"Maybe not," responded Phil, also sitting. But he had his private opinion.

And thus differences were adjusted.

The party lolled, relaxed in various postures, around the mess wagon. The wearied cow-horses stood drooping and dozing in the brush, waiting for

the herd to come in. Pete busied himself with his dough making and his Dutch ovens.

"Grub pi-i-ile," sighed Haney, softly, who had thrown down his dusty hat, and himself, equally dust-covered, beside it. "An' pity the pore cowboy. Seems laik I smell pie."

"Got an awful good smeller, then," returned Pete the cook. "I baked them pies this noon. 'Fraid they ain't much good, tho'. Reckon you fellers must be hungry. Have supper in a minute, now."

And this time not a voice extravagantly protested: "No hurry, Pete!"

Regardless of Pete's professional diffidence, the dried-apple pie baked in those Dutch ovens proved excellent. But to Phil the best thing on the menu was the canned tomatoes, whose pulp and juice, poured into a tin cup and drunk therefrom, were as nectar to alkali-burned mouth and throat. Phil never would have believed that common canned tomato supped out of a common tin cup could be so lusciously good.

Hombre came in with the horse-herd or cavvy; the Open A man went out with it. Phil was thankful that Old Jess had not assigned *him* to a night watch—he, Phil, being about "all in."

"Get enough riding to hold yuh till morning?" queried Mr. Simms, observing him stiffly stagger to his feet.

Phil smiled; he could not deny. And glad enough to pull off his boots, yawning scandalously the meantime, he early put himself to bed; Chet joining him and the rest of the camp being not much later.

Not until he was lying snug and comfortable amidst the coverings, upon the hard ground, did the message of the arroyo occur to him—and Chet's note found in the brush.

He gave an explosive little exclamation.

"What'smatter," murmured Chet, drowsily.

"We never said anything about the signs and that note !"

"She's 'way off now," murmured Chet.

But drifting into slumber, Phil resolved that the appeal should not pass unheeded. The girl should be succored, and if possible those villains, the man with one eye, the man with the limp, and the man with the frozen smile, be brought to book.

So again the round-up camp slept. And the cattle, likewise wearied, about the water-hole, they, also, no doubt, slept; old cow, baby calf, bachelor steer and lordly bull recking naught of the morrow, servants all to the pitiless law of the range.

CHAPTER XX

PHIL PROVES HIMSELF

To Phil it seemed that scarcely had he closed his eyes when he was being obliged to rise again, and start upon another day. With yawns and grunts and interchange of jocularities, in the frosty pink of the dawn the camp dragged itself from bed and gathered at the cook's fire. Some keen glances were cast upon himself, as if critically appraising his condition; and he endeavored to bear himself jauntily and tried hard not to limp. He hoped that he did not look as he felt—generally stiff and drawn and burned, and, in particular spots, sore. He did not comprehend, yet, that the men read him (or thought they read him) like a book of brands; and he was ignorant that his eyes were blood-shot and inflamed, and tell-tale by themselves alone. He thought that he caught reference to his name between Old Jess and Mr. Simms: but nobody addressed him otherwise than casually; so he paid no attention except to his own business, which was the proper thing to do.

“Boy,” said Mr. Simms, after breakfast, while the horse-herd was approaching, “there won't be much doing to-day. A couple of us will shove that bunch we got yesterday a few miles up the country, and there'll be a little gathering in some o' the pockets

we missed in the circle. How'd you like to stay 'round camp and help the cook a bit?"

Phil's face fell, but he answered promptly:

"All right. If you and Jess think I'd better."

"The cook needs somebody to fetch him wood," continued Mr. Simms, hesitantly. "You did your riding yesterday, and to-day'll be about the same thing, only less so. The roundup's young, yet, and you'll get plenty of it 'fore you quit. And in the higher country you'll enjoy it more. These are nothing but the bad lands."

"Yes; if I can do anything I'll stay in camp. Sure," assented Phil, now rallying from his disappointment.

"Good," approved the cattleman. "There isn't anybody'll think less of you for it. It's all in the roundup work, to do what you're asked to do. Every little helps. What hawss you going to ride to-day?"

"Will I need a horse?"

"Sure. Save out a hawss to snake the wood with. You may want him, anyhow; and it'll be too late after the herd's gone out again."

"Medicine Eye, then. It's his turn," and Phil brightened, for he had feared being that disconsolate creature, a cowboy relegated to foot duty.

"You rope him, or I?"

"I'll rope him," declared Phil.

And so he did, at the first throw; Medicine Eye, a long-legged bay with an eye walled (whence his name), and further distinguished by a split ear, obligingly standing quietly on the outside of the herd.

This was quite a morning for "uncorking" horses, no less than three animals bucking and racing through the brush, carrying their hard-sitting riders, while the camp applauded. Phil fervently hoped that Medicine Eye would not be infected by the examples, for he *could* buck, could Medicine Eye; everybody said so.

Having saddled him and tethered him to a clump of sage, Phil watched the camp, Chet and all, save the cook, ride away; and the satisfaction that he was not obliged to try out Medicine Eye before them helped him to endure being left behind.

"What do you want me to do first, Pete?" he asked, turning.

"If I'm goin' to make up a mess o' bear-sign, I'll have to have more wood. Got to have it anyway," blurted Pete, gruffly, seeming to be not in the best of humors.

"All right. What's bear-sign?"

"Oh, doughnuts, fried cakes, whatever yuh call 'em out East."

Phil proceeded to Medicine Eye.

"Where do I get the wood?" he ventured.

Pete snorted.

"Get it? You know wood when yuh see it, don't yuh?"

"Yes," answered Phil, meekly.

"Well, those hills yonder are full of it. Put yore rope on a bunch of it an' snake it back. That's all yuh got to do."

Phil threw the lines over Medicine Eye's head, and

laid a foot in the stirrup, to mount. He paused apprehensively. Medicine Eye appeared to shrink, at the movement, and stood curiously humped, his walled optic rolling back just a mere flicker. So Phil paused.

"Goin' to buck, ain't he?" addressed Pete, cheerfully, from his dishwashing by the fire.

"I don't know. I guess not," averred Phil, in an uncertain voice.

"Sorter humpy, jus' the same," persisted Pete, not at all reassuring. "Get on him quick. Wouldn't give him much time to think."

His heart in his mouth Phil desperately swung aboard.

"Ought to have cheeked him," decreed Pete, watching.

Medicine Eye did not budge. He stood ominously humped; when Phil landed in the saddle he had slightly cringed, that is all.

"Well, reckon you'll have to stick him. Hold up his head an' stick him. Can't set there all day. *I* need some *wood*," directed Pete, ruthlessly.

Taking a deep breath and still far from confident, Phil gathered short rein, and modestly touched Medicine Eye underneath with the spur; and clucked.

"Gwan."

With oddly stiff, jolty, abbreviated steps Medicine Eye rebelliously moved through the brush.

"Aw, he ain't goin' to buck," called Pete. "He's changed his mind. Here's the ax."

Ax across shoulder, Phil, greatly relieved by the outcome of events, rode athwart the flat, for a sparsely

timbered knoll half a mile distant. Medicine Eye still moved gingerly, as if not quite sure of himself, but his rider boldly spurred him into a gallop.

Collecting a pile of the dry boughs and dead trunks, having knocked off the smaller side branches, Phil tightened his loop about a compact bundle and returned, gloriously dragging it from his saddle-horn, to Pete.

Pete viewed it with disgust.

"What do yuh call that?" he demanded.

"Wood," said Phil. "Why?"

Pete kicked the bundle contemptuously apart with his foot, scattering it.

"Wood," he snorted, sourly. "An' not a stick in it that a man can burn. If I was some cooks an' you brought me a mess o' piñon to soot the camp up with, I'd chase you off the ground with a six-shooter. Ain't there no cedar over there?"

"I suppose so," stammered Phil, astonished.

"Well, y'ou put in yore time on that. An' don't you ever again insult no roundup cook by fetchin' him pitch-pine when he wants *wood*! Hurry up; I got this bear-sign to bake, 'fore noon."

Crestfallen, Phil rode back to the knoll; and behind him, at the mess wagon, the cook grumbled, disgruntled, giving forth caustic remarks on the "fool tenderfoot who fetched piñon when he was tol' to get *wood*!"

Medicine Eye had steadied into ordinary horse manner, and had objected not at all to hauling the bundle of piñon, nor was he objecting now to hauling

its successor, the bundle of cedar, bouncing and tumbling along in the rear. But when almost at the fire the bundle caught fast in the brush.

"Come along. Pull her loose, an' come along. I can't wait all day," bade Pete, the despot. "Fire's most out, already."

Phil spurred Medicine Eye, the rope drew taut, strained, and with a sudden snapping the bundle tore loose, to hurtle forward and land under Medicine Eye's rear cinch. An up-projecting stick prodded him in the tenderness of his stomach—and with an af-frighted jump and grunt he was off.

"Hi! Ki yi!" yelled Pete, also electrified. "Now he's buckin'. Hang to him, kid. Hold up his head—hold up his head!"

For Medicine Eye, totally abandoning his pacific mien, was gyrating wildly. Down was his head, up was his back, curved was his tail, and thud, thud, grunt, grunt, he hopped through the brush.

Alarmed and amazed at the violent change in his charger, Phil could only cling desperately. Jerk, jerk, jerk he went, the oscillations of the earthquake saddle almost snapping his head from his neck.

"Pull leather, but stay with him!" shrieked Pete. "Get the motion! Get the motion! Don't fight it!"

Amidst his terrific jouncing Phil tried to collect himself, to remember all that he had heard in respect to riding a "bad hawss," and to put it into practice, now at his need. But his ideas were being jolted together, and mixed.

"Grip with yore thighs." "Ride loose." "Best

rider ever I saw rode as if he was unjointed." "Ketch yore spurs in his cinch. That's the way I do." These fragments of conversation, shaken to the surface, submerged again, were succeeded by others.

Away shot Phil's hat; his left foot lost the stirrup, and he hung, sprawled sideways, half off. The end was near. But a lucky bounce righted him again. At the very first leap his rope had slipped from the horn, and the bundle of cedar was somewhere in the brush.

"Hey! Where the dickens yuh headin'?" expostulated Pete. "Turn him. Confound you, look what you're doin' now!"

He fled, but from his safe vantage the other side of the wagon he continued to berate. Into the kitchen had lurched Medicine Eye, and was plunging, regardless, there. Over rolled Dutch ovens, a kick sent the coffee-pot flying, the pails sped helter skelter, and at the touch of hoof the mess box distributed "reloading tools" 'far and wide.

"Get out o' there!" yelled Pete, frantic. "Ain't yuh got no sense, either of yuh?"

Now Phil's right foot was out of the stirrup. And as incited to fresh endeavors by the rattle of kitchen-ware under his hoofs, Medicine Eye, snorting, jumped yet higher, his rider, flung from him at a tangent, landed in a tall bush of greasewood.

Medicine Eye, lightened of the weight, instantly ceased his spasm and, as if ashamed, mildly looked about him.

Pete left his retreat and advanced into the open.

"Hurt yuh?" he asked.

Phil had picked himself up, and was feeling his face, somewhat scratched.

"No," he said. "Where's my hat, I wonder. Didn't he buck, though!"

"Who? *That* hawss? He didn't buck," retorted the cook, scornfully. "Don't call that buckin', do yuh?"

"Trouble is," continued Pete, "you can't ride. Yuh sit like a sack o' potatoes. An' look what yuh done to my camp, too! Pots an' pails kicked all to pieces an' a whole batch o' bear-sign spoiled. Darn yuh! Yuh ought to had yore head busted. Where's that hawss? I'll take all the buck out o' *him*! That's what comes o' havin' a tenderfoot in a roundup camp. Never see one yet that wasn't better off where he belonged, at home."

Thus scolding, Pete strode wrathfully to Medicine Eye and grabbing him by the bit led him roughly out.

"I'll give yuh somethin' to buck for," he declared. "Butt in on my ovens, will yuh? Step in my coffee pot, will yuh? An' dump dough all over the sage brush! When I'm on yore back you'll wish yuh could lay down somewheres and die! I've forked buckin' hawsses before."

Grasping the bridle at the cheek strap, and twisting Medicine Eye's head rudely in toward him, he vaulted into the saddle.

"Now go it!" he ordered. "What yuh standin' for? Go it."

But Medicine Eye's brief fit was over. He had

wearied of his program, as abruptly ended as begun, and he was good horse again. Perhaps, as alleged, he was ashamed. As if bewildered by the strenuousness of his new rider he cantered a few tentative steps.

"Go it, blame yuh! Buck! Yuh bucked with a man who couldn't ride; now buck with a man who can! Yuh got the real thing on yore back—a buster from Busterville. When he ain't bustin' he cooks; but mostly he's bustin'! Whoopee! I'll teach yuh to run over my Dutch ovens an' good dough!"

On this side and on that Pete slapped him across the face with broad hat, and the while prodded him with his heels.

"Take up the back cinch," called Phil.

Pete leaned and jerked at the cinch. As if he were a trick horse and this were a signal, Medicine Eye, loath no more, commenced indeed to perform. Away he went, bucking, over the brush; and rocking in the saddle Pete yelped with glee.

"Buck!" he urged, slapping with the hat. "You ain't buckin'! You—whoa-oa, Emma!"

Exasperated by the continual nagging Medicine Eye now at last opened up. He bucked; he pitched so violently that twice he almost fell backward, and Pete swung loose, preparatory; he squealed and shook his head, and tore hither and thither. Pete's hat no longer slapped him—for the hat had gone to join Phil's. Pete no longer urged him on—for urging would be superfluous. Pete no longer yelped with derision—for Pete's breath was becoming too precious

to be wasted. But well and stoutly rode Pete, expuncher, sometime cook, and had not Medicine Eye, dashing at full speed for the creek, on the bank set his fore-feet and abruptly stopped short, Pete might have been riding there yet. As it was, he left the saddle and head-first proceeded over Medicine Eye's ears, with a mighty splash entering the water below.

Not knowing whether to laugh or to sympathize Phil ran to the rescue. When he gazed from the bank he was frightened. At this point, the current, muddy and sluggish, flowed ominously smooth. Evidently the creek was deep here. And there was no token of Pete!

Phil hastily kicked off his chaps and tugged at his boots, all the time keeping his gaze fixed upon the surface of the thick flow.

Aha! A swirl in the water, and the sight of Peter's ashy, streaming face and staring eyes!

Phil hesitated not an instant, but plunged in. Ugh! The surprisingly cold fluid took his breath away as he soused under, and as he rose to the surface again he gasped convulsively. He had no stomach; no room to inhale, either; and fighting to start his lungs he drew short, shuddering whiffs of the life-giving oxygen. But he must not think of himself. He was here for Pete; and as he raised high and peered along the stream he again saw Pete's agonized countenance, amidst a great threshing of arms. Forgetting his own sensations of pain he frantically struck out for the spot.

Groping with legs and hands presently he encoun-

tered a soft, yielding object, and his fingers closed upon it. At the same time his feet touched bottom; and also at the same time Pete, who evidently enough was not yet unconscious, returned the grasp with interest by clutching him tightly and literally clawing a way along his person to the surface.

They stood front to front; Pete holding on, for dear life, and coughing raucously, strangled as he was; Phil gradually sinking deeper and deeper, held by the cook's weight and his own.

"Let go of me!" he ordered. "You're all right now. We're on bottom. Let go of me. We're sinking. You're drowning both of us."

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" coughed Pete, and essaying to hoist himself farther inch by inch as inch by inch Phil settled.

"You'll drown us both!" protested Phil, angrily, pushing him away, and trying to wrench loose.

"No, no! Oh, no, no!" gurgled Pete, whom the unpleasant word "drown" set off into a panic renewed. "Hold me up. Ugh! Ugh!"

The water rose to Phil's lips and he tilted his chin; past his nose, and under he went, Pete fatuously clinging to him like a squirrel to a piece of bark.

In the icy, suffocating depths they floundered; and still grappled they came up again. The water here was only chest-deep—Phil's chest. They were at the edge of a little island; and Phil staggered up on it, the coughing cook hanging to his neck.

"Now let go, can't you!" bade Phil, out of patience. "You can't drown *here!*"

Pete opened his eyes, and stared affrighted about him. Reluctantly he loosened his clutch; Phil by an impatient jerk shook him off entirely.

"You ought not to hang on like that, when a fellow's trying to help you. You keep him from doing anything," rebuked Phil, as hotly as possible for anybody so cold.

"I sure thought I was a goner," confessed Pete. "Ugh! Ugh!"

"Well, come on."

"Where you goin'?" asked Pete.

"Ashore. We can wade it."

"She looks deep. Darn that hawss! Say, wait a minute."

"No. I'm freezing. You can wade where I can, I should think," and Phil, with this sarcastic prod, started.

"Go slow. I'm right behind. But I'd feel a heap safer if somebody had a rope on me. Ugh! Ugh!"

The water was only waist-high, and plowing through it, Pete breathing hard and fearfully, they clambered up the bank. Now in the air and slight breeze, warm though the sun was, their teeth chattered, their bodies shook.

"B-by th-thunder, that was a n-narrow squeak," asserted Pete. "Did you jump in after me?"

"Why, y-yes," said Phil. "But I d-didn't need t-to. It wasn't over y-your head."

"W-wasn't maybe if I h-hadn't b-been wrong side up. Darned hawss d-didn't give me n-no chance. You p-peel off them clothes. Got s-some others?"

"Yes. P-peel off your own."

"Goin' to. But I ain't had pneumony. You have. Ugh! Burr!"

"Oh, Jiminy, but we're sights!" laughed Phil, suddenly hilarious as he stripped by the wagon. "Mud bath."

"Swallowed so much my lungs are all bogged down," grumbled Pete, likewise stripping. "Never will get 'em out. Great Henry, boy!" he exclaimed abruptly, eying Phil. "What are those things on yuh?"

"Saddle sores, I guess."

"*Saddle sores!* Well, if you ain't branded proper I'm a greaser! Don't they hurt yuh?"

"Some."

"Humph! I take off my hat to yuh. A man who'll set on those an' never say a word has certainly got grit, for a tenderfoot."

"They'll wear off," alleged Phil, embarrassed.

"Got to," agreed Pete. "Well," he sighed, "mebbe yuh can't ride like yuh ought to, but you're wise to the water. I can ride, but I'm plumb locoed when I get in water." He was almost dressed, and he proceeded to spread out his soggy clothing on the bushes. "Yuh might fetch in that wood, now," he directed. "I'm goin' to build some more bear-sign."

Phil went to Medicine Eye, who was standing half asleep, and prepared to mount. Pete, picking up his precious hat, out of a corner of his eye observed.

"Think you'll give him another whirl, eh?"

"Might as well," declared Phil, with a confidence

which surprised himself. "Got to have wood, haven't we? I'm not going to pack it clear in through the brush on foot."

"I guess he won't make any more trouble, if he ain't teched under his belly," and as if dismissing past events entirely Pete turned his back, to work. But in his gruffness and apparent unconcern Phil fancied there lay a note of approval, again.

Medicine Eye was now as docile and willing as the staidest of old cow-horses. The wood (cedar!) was snaked without mishap—Phil being wary of trespass on his mount's back-cinch region—and the new batch of bear-sign was committed to the ovens. When the camp for the first time assembled at dinner the delicacy was ready.

Little by little Pete divulged the events of the morning.

"Mebbe he can't ride, yet, but he's sure wised to the water," he insisted, magnanimously. "Jumped right in, he did." And he wagged his big hat.

"That's more than any man in camp would do," averred Mr. Simms, with tone positive. "Unless it's Ford. You swim, boy?"

"Of course," blushed Phil.

"Then I reckon you and Ford are the only people in this whole country who can. And Ford's forgotten, ain't yuh, Ford?"

"Shouldn't wonder. I'd probably try to rope anybody out like the rest of you," said Ford, good-naturedly.

"Gee, wish I could swim," quoth Chet, with open

envy. "But there ain't any place to learn, in the mountains. Water's too cold."

"'Fraid o' snaiks, daown in Texas where I was raised," declared Haney.

Phil endeavored not to be over-proud.

"I didn't have to swim more than a few strokes," he explained. "It wasn't over our heads."

"Was over mine," insisted Pete, stubbornly; "'cause I went in that end fust an' got to millin' 'round."

Following a few words together, after dinner, with Old Jess, Mr. Simms spoke aside, with Phil.

"Pete says you've got saddle welts on you as big as his finger. How are they? Pretty sore?"

"No, sir; I can stand them," asserted Phil, determined not to let anybody be concerned about him.

"Good. They'll flatten out, after a bit. How'd you like to wrangle hawsses, for a while, then? Old Jess thinks you'll do, and that other boy hasn't turned up, yet."

Phil's face fell. He preferred being a cowboy.

"There's a dollar a day in it," tempted the cattleman, reading his countenance. "You'll be regular on the pay-roll. Better try it. We all of us begun by jinglin' hawsses at the roundup. Chet did, Buster did, so did Dick. Besides, we got to have somebody."

"Yes, sir. I'll do it, then," assented Phil, still not overjoyed.

"Don't think it isn't a full-size job; because it is," instructed the cattleman. "A good wrangler means a whole lot to a camp. Get the hawsses in

promptly and don't lose any of 'em, and you'll find we all appreciate it. This lets you out o' night-hawking, too. If you herd all day yuh can sleep all night—at least, till four or five o'clock. The herd's coming, now. You can go back out with it, and let Hombre show you the fine points, this afternoon."

CHAPTER XXI

PHIL MEETS THE ENEMY AND IS THEIRS

THE official post of "hawss jingler" proved after all a job not unpleasant nor to be sneezed at. It consisted of supervising the herd from early dawn until dusk—seeing that none of the horses strayed, and that all were brought in three times a day in readiness for the camp to select fresh mounts.

At first Phil had been rather staggered when he came to figure upon managing alone a hundred animals loose in the open sage. But Hombre instructed him.

"You not need watch ever'one, jus' a few," said Hombre, his white teeth flashing as he talked so earnestly. "Dos few they lead off, others follow. Dat ol' white mare with brown colt—she a bad one. All time sneakin' off. She ought be hobbled. Mares, they the worst, always. Watch mares. Horses follow *them*, ever' time. Ladies fust, jus' as with us. That ol' white mare with brown colt, an' that big roan with one ear busted (her name Jack Rabbit), an' that ol' black fool with star on forehead, an' that little bay Flying U man brought, with Box C brand on hip—dos ones all bad for sneakin', an' takin' ever' hoss they can get with 'em. When I see they in the herd, I guess nobody gone, an' I lie in the sage and sleep, mebbe."

"You know why they call hoss-herd 'cavvy'?" inquired Hombre, next.

"No," answered Phil. "I've been wondering."

"That from Mexican—my language. 'Caballada'—eet mean hoss-herd, too. Americano say 'cavvy'—what you call 'em—for short. Eet 'remuda,' down South."

"But that other's a Spanish word, isn't it?" suggested Phil.

"No, no!" Hombre was vehement. "Caballada; eet Mexican. I no spik Spanish. All Mexicano," he asserted proudly.

Phil wisely did not argue.

It took only a couple of days for him to know each horse in the herd. There were ninety-three when every rider in camp had one out. This included the four team-horses used on the wagon. He found that Hombre had spoken truly, and that if especial care was taken of the ring-leaders in mischief, the herd stayed together. That was a good scheme. The most toilsome part was rolling out in the frosty graying just at the approach of dawn, when even the cook scarcely was stirring; and sleepily donning garments by sense of touch, to stumble through the dim brush, stiffly mount the waiting horse, in the cold saddle ride yawning away, and rounding up the herd grazing and groaning amidst the lightening sage to bring it in by sunrise.

Then, relieved that every horse was present, he could enjoy his cup of hot coffee and his other breakfast, while his charges were in the rope corral. After

the mounts of the morning were caught, his own among them, out he drove the herd again—glad enough, all left of it, to escape—and putting it at pasture in a convenient draw loafed in the saddle or upon the ground, sun-warmed and comfortable, guarding. Occasionally he must make a dash to turn back the “ol’ white mare,” or the Jack Rabbit mare, or another of the sisterhood; and this gave a spice of excitement to his solitary vigil under the broad blue sky.

At noon, or when the sun was highest, he gathered his charges and took them in to camp again, if they were to be needed, and at sunset did the same. After he had placed them for the night he could return to bed.

He missed the companionship of Chet, and of Haney and Ford and the rest; but he was doing regular work, and actually was earning wages. He was a real member of the camp—albeit nobody had ever spoken very complimentary of “hawss jingling” as a profession.

The roundup proceeded. Phil was freed from the long, dusty rides out, and the plodding, nerve-racking drives in, but he rather envied Chet and the men their burned, weary appearance, as he saw them at meals and around the fire in the evenings. He was no “hawss jingler,” by spirit; not he. Like Hombre he was merely helping out until the genuine wrangler turned up. He, Phil, was cow-puncher with the Bar B outfit.

The country at this end of the Owl Creek range

had now been well gone over, the cattle had been pushed on up, and 'twas time to move the camp.

"We're goin' to change over to the Big Piney water-hole, in the mornin'," announced Old Jess, to Phil. "You can have Chet to help yuh take the herd. He knows the country. You don't—an' it's a two-man job, anyway."

Therefore, the next morning, the horse herd was not driven out again to pasture, as usual, but was held in the rope corral. The saddle animals and the pack animals were snaked out, the beds were tied on, the men good-naturedly helped Pete with his wagon; and soon after breakfast the camp dispersed, the riders diverging across the sage, the herd, in charge of Chet and Phil, with Pete and his four-horse equipage behind, following a trail. And the rendezvous was, as said, the Big Piney water-hole—though where that lay, Phil had no idea.

But Chet and Pete had. This sagy, rolling country with scarcely a land-mark in it—mesa resembling mesa, and shaly hill resembling shaly hill—was as varied and as familiar to them as is city or town to anybody living there. Over yonder was the water-hole, and they knew exactly the way to it without looking for numbers or landmarks, nor counting blocks nor turns.

The herd drove at a free pace, stringing out along the dusty road, now breaking into a trot as the two boys pressed the rear and the motion was communicated through to the van, and now slackening to a walk.

Glad were Phil and Chet to be together again. As they rode they chatted like old pardners of the range re-united. Presently, glancing back at Pete who with his heavy wagon had been dropping further and further behind, Phil exclaimed:

"Where's he going?"

For the cook was striking off on his own hook, into the sage.

"He's making a short cut, to hit the trail again ahead of us," declared Chet. "But I know a shorter one. Wait. We'll fool him, and beat him into camp, easy."

Pete obliqued into a shallow draw and gradually disappeared. The boys continued on along the road. They traveled briskly. The country became rougher, rim-rock and steep little hills, bouldered and timbered with squat cedar, hedging the way on either hand. But the road followed a slightly rolling course, between.

After some five miles, Chet ordered:

"Turn 'em up here."

Galloping from the flank Phil headed the herd and directed the leaders up the sharp, loosely-graveled incline at the right; snorting and jostling and scrambling the horses made the ascent. The top was level. A single trail led across it, through the cedars and the piñons, and this they followed.

"Pete couldn't get up here with the wagon," chuckled Chet, delighted at the prospect. "He thinks he's smart, but we'll fool him."

"How far is the Big Piney now?" asked Phil.

"About fifteen mile, straight across this mesa. This is the old Ute trail. It reaches clear across the State, from Wyoming down into New Mexico."

"'Tisn't the trail Chief Billy was taking, with me, is it?"

"No. He was going into Utah. The Uintah trail's different. This is the big trail for hunting and war parties. But they don't use it much, any more."

Phil might have enjoyed the romance of following this old enduring bridle path over which had passed during so many years the Indian upon hunt or foray bent; but he had much else to occupy his thoughts.

"Aw, what yuh doin'!" shouted Chet, at the herd. "Red Bird! Get out o' there! Ring! Sukie!" He explained wrathfully to Phil. "They try to rub their packs off by squeezing between two trees, and scraping under branches. Look at that? Red Bird's torn my tarp! Watch 'em."

The trail led through a stretch of large cedars and piñons thickly set. The very spirit of mischief seemed to have pervaded the herd. The horses spread out, and went racing and kicking amidst the trees, the pack animals astutely rubbing their packs against everything available. Both Phil and Chet had their hands full, riding flank and rear; reproving, coercing, galloping forward and galloping back, seeing that no member was left, and that the packs stayed in place.

The old white mare and her brown colt were on Phil's side, and persistently gave him trouble. They

edged more and more to the outskirts, and presently he would glimpse them making away, at an angle, through the tree trunks, slavishly accompanied by half a dozen willing satellites. Whereupon, spurring out and hallooing, back he would turn them into the column again. Ah, twain pests they were, that old white mother and her lanky brown boy.

There they went once more, trotting determinedly off at a tangent with the main body, on an independent course in quest of the unknown lying to the right. His keen eyes roving hither and thither, Phil sighted them; and spurring Gray Jack he dashed recklessly through the cedars, to foil the plot.

Away loped the white mare and brown colt, with four others whom they had inveigled; and hard pursued Phil, swinging out in order to cut ahead of them.

With crackle, crash and shout on they raced, thirty yards apart, Gray Jack and the white mischief-maker, the trees intervening. This time the truant band was proving most stubborn.

Faster pressed Phil. It was a test of wills, and he *had* to keep on now, after his first attempt. Out they all sped together, Phil dismayed but undaunted, Gray Jack grunting with eagerness, the truants evidently enjoying themselves; out from the thicker cedars, and up a sloping swale well grassed and thinly timbered, with ledgy shelves protruding. Something jumped up with an explosive quickness from beside a boulder right under Gray Jack's nose and went bounding off, flashing white rump. It was a deer, the first that Phil ever had seen wild. Involuntarily he pulled

Gray Jack short, to gaze admiringly. Amidst the grass and ledges a snappy, flat report rang out, and the bounding creature pitched forward, to lie kicking. A man on horseback, whom Phil had not noted before, came riding down, from opposite the fallen animal. Phil trotted over, curious—a glance showing him that the old white mare and her followers had halted and were grazing. He would have a look at the deer, and then riding on would turn his squad of truants. The man had dismounted and was cutting the deer's throat, to bleed it. He straightened up, as Phil arrived, and waited with an amused, rather con-ceited smirk on his face. It was the man with the frozen smile!

"Oh! It's you once more, is it?" stammered Phil, taken aback.

"Yes; we meet again, lad," responded the man, civilly. "You don't happen to be a game warden, I reckon?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"They say it's against the law to shoot a deer this time o' year; but the law don't get up here. It ain't meant for us men who need meat. Fine buck, eh?"

Phil mumbled assent.

"Those your hosses?" asked the man.

"They're part of the roundup herd."

"Same ol' white mare that was givin' you the chase before, eh?" mused the man. "Must be changin' camp. Goin' far?"

"Over to the Big Piney. Where are you traveling to?"

"Me? I'm jus' prospectin' through, aimin' fer Utah. Say, did you ever see a fatter buck than this, for June? He's shorely a beauty. How'd you like to take a quarter 'long with you to camp? Bet you're all tired o' beef by this time."

"Why—but it's your deer," stammered Phil. "Can't you use it all?"

"Me? No, there's more than I can ever eat. See, I'll show you. Supposin' I cut this quarter off, here——" and bending he sketched with the point of his knife-blade on the hide. "You set still a minute an' I'll butcher it out, an' then you can turn your hosses back an' ride into camp besides with a nice mess o' venison tied on your saddle. The cook'll be glad to see you, an' so 'll the boys." He commenced work, and continued his ingratiating line of talk. "Won't stop to hang this critter up; 'll jus' give you your piece now, quick as I can. S'pose you're in a hurry. But those hosses 'll find the herd when you've headed 'em back. I'll help you. Ever kill a deer?"

Phil, interested by the process going on, was reluctantly answering "no" when he caught a slight but familiar swish; he was about to turn, for locating the sound, when with strike like a lash something whipped about his shoulders, and simultaneously, at a sudden shout from the man and a spring forward by Gray Jack, he was jerked viciously from the saddle.

The back of his head banged thunderously against the ground, and in a flash of fire he began a long, long journey through space.

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST OF THE MAN WITH THE FROZEN SMILE

PHIL does not know how long that journey lasted, but when he landed from it and looked about him he was propped, half-sitting, behind two boulders which, touching, formed an angle. This angle held *him*, and a rope wound around and around him held his arms to his sides. Before, and down a little slope, voices were speaking. It happened that the rough surfaces of the boulders in contact left a small loop-hole on a level with the eye; so that, now by chance looking through this, Phil found himself gazing at Chet's honest, tanned face, directly in line and sixty or seventy yards away.

From the saddle Chet was talking with someone.

"No, ain't seen 'em sence," declared the someone. "Feller about your age, you say?"

"Yes. Riding a gray Circle Dot hawss," responded Chet. "They broke away from the herd and I suppose he followed them."

"White mare an' two or three other hawsses went by down yonder a bit ago, jes' as I said. But no boy was after 'em. Guess you'd better look further."

Phil started to call Chet's attention to this inaccuracy, when a hard point punching him in the side caused him to turn his gaze. The man with the

frozen smile was sitting by him, and the hard point was the muzzle of a rifle.

The frozen smile was unaltered, but the eyes above it were full of silent meaning. Just beyond the man (and as if she, too, was prisoner to him) crouched the unkempt yet not unattractive girl of the arroyo. She gave a little shake of her head and an odd, speaking little frown. Her battered slouch hat was upon the ground beside her. Her hair hung in two long braids, one over each shoulder, their ends tied with dragged bows of black ribbon. She proceeded idly to play with them, flirting them behind her and drawing them back again.

Phil felt that the shake and the frown had counseled him to keep quiet—advice emphasized sufficiently, indeed, by that rifle muzzle poking into him. So he dumbly submitted. When he had shifted his eyes to the peep-hole once more, Chet was about to leave.

"All right," he was drawling, clearly. "Must have been swinging 'round 'em, to head 'em in."

"Like as not."

"Nice buck you got there. Well, so long."

"Yes. Come in handy when a man's plumb out o' meat. Wait; I'll ride with yuh," and the speaker grunted as if he was tying the spoil on behind a saddle.

Chet stolidly sat, his glance wandering haphazard over the landscape, including the bouldered rampart. Phil, peering eagerly, thought several times that their eyes met; seemed to him that they *must* meet. But

Chet's glance wandered as carelessly across the boulders as anywhere else.

At sight of that familiar, homely countenance so near and yet so unconscious of him, Phil was flooded with an almost irrepressible desire to cry out; one single cry, as an announcement of his presence. But the hard muzzle of the rifle prodded him with a slight increase of pressure, warning. His captor knew his thoughts.

Chet turned Monte's head and rode him across the line of vision. Followed him the man with the limp (recognized at once by Phil), having behind the saddle the dressed deer. And now the vista was empty; exceedingly empty, for Chet was gone.

Still no movement to leave the boulders was made by the man with the frozen smile; and the three remained silent and quiet, as before. Ten minutes elapsed; and then, at last, the man arose cautiously to his knees and removing his hat peered cautiously over the top of the bulwark. After a long, earnest survey he emerged from the shelter and with more abandon seated himself in the open, his rifle ready across his knees.

"You two stay where you be," he ordered, gruffly, his hat over his eyes, his profile to them.

Phil, uncomfortable and helpless, looked mutely at the girl. She smiled (her teeth were white and even) and lifted her eyebrows whimsically. Even through her grime and sunburn she appeared to Phil as being pretty; at least, as being capable of prettiness were she given a show.

"Set him up, if you want to," bade the man, shortly.

"Can't I untie him?"

"No. An' keep out o' sight, too."

The girl helped Phil wriggle to a more easy posture, with his back higher against the rock.

"Much obliged," he panted.

"They'll untie you after a while," she assured, smiling frankly upon him. As said, her teeth were wholesomely white; and Phil noted that she evidently had made efforts to be neat.

"Yuh can cut all that out," informed the man, gruff as usual. "Save your wind."

So Phil and the girl could only sit facing each other and occasionally exchanging smiles; his rueful, hers friendly.

Measured by an invisible timepiece the minutes ticked away unbroken. At last the shuffling of hoofs was heard. Phil harkened anxiously; but the attitude of the man with the frozen smile, who now stood and lazily stretched, killed his hopes.

"Started him on?" asked the man, of the rider, casually.

"You bet. He's some worried, still, but I told him I'd round 'em up if I come acrost 'em, an' bring them an' the boy together into the camp. How is he? Got him hog-tied, yet, I see."

It was the man with the limp, gazing in from his horse. He grinned evilly under his thin black mustache.

"Roped, thrown an' tied, eh, boy?" he addressed.

"How's your head? You certainly did fall from that hawss. Ache?"

"No," denied Phil, angrily. But it did.

"I'll tell your friend, if I see him again. He's inquirin' about you, already. Well," he remarked, to the other man, "I'll fetch the hawsses over, an' we'll git out. Can't start any too soon."

He galloped away, presently returning leading three saddle animals, one of which was Gray Jack. Phil, out of the corners of his eyes spying them, was rejoiced to see Gray Jack. 'Twas like seeing an old acquaintance, and next to seeing Chet.

The man with the frozen smile unwrapped the rope bonds from about Phil's body.

"You git on your hoss an' come along," he directed. "If you don't try any tricks you won't be hurt. But if you do, there's trouble for yuh. You saw how I shot that runnin' buck? I'd shoot you just as quick."

"So'd I," supplemented his partner.

"You two foller *him*, an' I'll foller *you*," directed the first, continuing.

Phil, a little stiff and giddy, climbed into his saddle. The girl spryly ensconced herself in hers, sitting astride. The man with the limp rode off. The girl followed, and Phil obediently fell into line behind her. The man with the frozen smile brought up the rear.

With never another word they proceeded at a sharp trot along the slope, grassy and bouldered.

Phil could figure out no chance of escape. He was sandwiched in too closely. Behind was a man and a

rifle—and he had seen how accurately the twain worked together. Before was a man and presumably a revolver. No rifle was in evidence, but he must be armed. Mr. Simms was warrant for this. The man with the limp had fixed *him*, quick as a wink. Cogitating, Phil decided that in this case discretion was the better part of valor. Besides, the girl! If he escaped, he felt that he ought to take her with him. 'Twould be mean to desert her. She had been trying to escape, herself, for a long time, maybe, judging by the appeal left in that arroyo and found by Chet in the brush. If he stayed, they could help each other, and *both* get away.

Half around the hill the leader struck into a shallow swale, somewhat timbered with the usual cedars, intersecting their way, and ascending this until it suddenly ended against a steeper slope, they halted before a tangle of dead brush. Phil saw that the brush formed a rude corral; within were the old white mare, the lanky colt and a dozen other hosses, including all the Bar B truants.

A third man, rifle in hand, arose from a niche where he had been concealed, yawned and stretched. He was the man with the one eye.

"Tumble off," bade Phil's especial guardian behind; and thus prompted, Phil dismounted. So did the others.

"Set down, both of yuh."

With a little gesture of protest and her whimsical smiling lift of the brows the girl instantly plumped to the ground and sat upon her feet. Phil seated

himself more leisurely, to show, by his manner, *his* rebellion. The girl smiled upon him. The men compared notes—talking low so that only an occasional phrase reached Phil's ears.

"Water-hole—keep the kid—run the hosses out fust—didn't want to but had to do it—kid bumped right into him with the hawsses—no, couldn't let *them* by, an' the buck, too—sure; roped him off slick an' clean—he'd seen me too much before—no; other boy'd never seen Joe—jest kep' him talkin' an' then rode away with him to play safe—yes, liable to back-track"—mumble, mumble,—and "All right," from the man with the frozen smile. "But git a move on yuh. Ther' ain't no time to lose."

The two other men rode away; the man with the frozen smile, sitting rolling a cigarette, rifle across knees, remained on guard. The minutes passed. Nobody spoke. The man lighted his cigarette, and puffed. Phil disconsolately stared at his own boot toes, before him.

"Hee-hum," sighed the girl, demurely.

"Shut up," roughly rebuked the man.

With a little face the girl shrugged her shoulders, as if such a response was quite to be expected; and answering Phil's glance of concern smiled bravely. She was a girl of spirit.

Now, suddenly in the midst of the quiet, Phil caught sight of two horsemen galloping, against the hillside beyond. They were in the opposite quarter to that where the man with the limp and the man with the one eye had disappeared. And as suddenly

Phil's heart beat high. Those two figures looked familiar.

He waited breathlessly, hoping that no one else had noted. But he hoped in vain; the man with the frozen smile had seen as quick as he, and with a startled exclamation was springing to his feet. His face hardened; he hesitated, alertly searching right and left. Among the scattering of cedars back in the draw through which they had arrived sounded hoofs approaching at a trot. For an instant gazing hard, then abruptly decided, the man with a disgusted oath ran to his horse, vaulted into the saddle and spurred away across the pocket for the other side.

Down the opposite slope came thudding at full speed Pete the cook and Chet. Haney, bareheaded, face and hair aflame, now burst from the cedars; and riding like a demon flashed past. Chet pulled up by the two prisoners; Pete joined the Texan and the two raced on in pursuit of the man with the frozen smile. Pete was riding Pepper.

"Hello," greeted Chet, grin and shaggy chaps the same as ever (it seemed an age to Phil since he had last seen them), swinging to the ground.

He addressed Phil but looked at the girl.

However, there was little time to talk. All watched the pursuit. The fleeing rustler was pushing at full speed up the farther slope. Pete, his broad hat flaring back, was beating Haney. The three watchers—Phil and the girl on their feet, in their excitement; but they did not know—could hear the sharp commands to halt.

"He'll get away!" exclaimed the girl.

"No, he won't," replied Phil, hopefully.

"That's an awful good hawss he's on," appraised Chet.

"It used to be a race-horse," said the girl.

"But look at Pepper go, though!" directed Phil. Pepper was *his* horse.

"Yes, sir! Pete's closing up. I didn't know Pepper was that fast; did you?"

"Haney's mad at getting left. See him spur."

"Oh, I hope they do catch him," murmured the girl.

"They'll shoot pretty soon," announced Chet.

"They're shooting now!"

For on a sudden, the fugitive, as if nagged beyond endurance, turned in his saddle. His rifle, leveled backward, puffed faint smoke. Almost simultaneously the bullet zipped through the brush clear to the three spectators below—so nearly were they in the line of fire. He bent to his work again. The flat report finally drifted down.

The Texan swerved to the right. Phil thought that he was hit or dodging; but no, he was only seeking an easier grade, and kept doggedly on.

"Haney hasn't got any gun," vouchsafed Chet, soberly. "But he doesn't care."

Pete threw his horse on its haunches. The rifle that he was carrying jerked to his shoulder.

"Oh, I hope nobody is killed," quavered the girl.

"Look out!" she almost screamed, in warning.

"He shot first," accused both boys.

Pete's rifle spurted rapidly—once, twice, three times. The fugitive turned and again fired. The horses in the brush corral ran about wildly. The bullet must have struck among them. Phil jumped to catch Gray Jack and the girl's horse, which also showed signs of unrest. At the same time he saw Pete shoot once more; and the fugitive, crumpling forward, pitched limply to the ground; was dragged along several feet, and was left lying in a formless blotch while his horse trotted on a few yards, and stopped.

"He got him!" cried Chet.

Pete (they could see him shove fresh cartridges into his magazine) rode up. Haney obliqued and joined him. The two gazed down upon the blotch. They did not dismount. But stooping from the saddle Haney picked up the rifle; and next catching the horse by the bridle they came slowly back, horses lathered, to the three spectators.

"All over," quoth Haney, endeavoring to speak lightly.

"Is he killed?" quavered the girl.

"Plumb," declared Pete.

"Oh, oh!" she moaned. "I wish I hadn't seen. I didn't want anybody killed."

Regret and sorrow, in a little shiver, passed through Phil also. Chet was grave—embarrassedly kicking with one toe at a bit of brush.

"He was the best of the three to me," faltered the girl. "He hardly ever struck me, even when I teased him. Is he dead?"

"He was, Miss, last time I looked at him," avowed Pete, wiping his forehead, still wet with exertion.

"What'd they do to you, Smith-Jones?" queried Haney. "Hurt yuh any?"

"Just roped me off my horse, is all."

"We must start some hustlin'," said Pete. "You boys afraid to stay here alone?"

"No."

"There are two other men. They rode off just before you came," added Phil.

"They won't bother, after all that shootin'. But here——" and Pete passed his rifle to Chet. "You all set in the cedars a ways an' if anybody interferes with yuh, fix 'em. We'll be back direc'ly."

With Haney he galloped away—Pepper bearing him gallantly.

"Hope I find my hat," they heard Haney remark, plaintively. "Cedar done snatched it off."

The boys led the three horses back amidst the cedars of the swale, and with the girl sat down where they could see the brush corral and the approaches to it.

"How did you know where to find us?" demanded Phil, of Chet; striving to blur the mental picture of the body lying on the hill-slope.

"Aw, I saw you behind those boulders. I saw you all the time I was talking," declared Chet. "That man didn't fool me for a minute—but I had to let them think he did."

"Then you saw me looking through that hole? You never let on; that's sure," said Phil, admiringly.

"I mightn't have seen if something hadn't flipped above the rocks, like a bat."

"That was my braids," asserted the girl. "I flipped them on purpose, as high as I could."

"I saw them and then I sort of made out somebody's eye stopping a crack, and I guessed. The man gave me a nice talk, but I didn't see any rifle and I knew he hadn't killed the deer. Then he was left-handed with his knife, and——"

"He limped, too."

"Not riding, he didn't. But I decided that soon as he quit me I'd leave the hawss-herd at the first good place and ride ahead and get the men back quick. Then here came Haney, 'cross country, to say that camp had been changed to Coyote Springs, because the Big Piney hole was dry. So we hustled the herd one side, and roped out a hawss for Pete, and caught the wagon. Pete was tickled to join in. He got his saddle out in a jiffy, and he had a rifle, too, in the wagon. Then we reckoned the rustlers would make for the old cowboy corral, here; it's a good place to hold stock in, and it's out of the way; so we cut over to it, and divided up—and you saw us come."

"You bet I did," agreed Phil, heartily. "Where have Pete and Haney gone?" he asked.

"There's a spade in the wagon, I suppose," answered Chet.

"Oh." Phil was silent a moment. "Wish Pete hadn't had to do it," he said, impulsively.

"I don't know." Chet spoke slowly. "Rustlers

must expect to end like that. It's the law of the range. And he shot first."

Chet suddenly appeared to be a man. Eyeing him, and listening, Phil realized that beneath his chubby exterior his partner already was invested with the grim practical spirit of the open, where men must take care of themselves, and the fittest survive.

"What's your name?" asked Chet, directly, of the girl.

"Cherry. What's yours?"

"Mine's Chester Simms. His is Philip Macowan."

"Mine's just Cherry. That's all I know."

"That man" (and Chet nodded toward the hillside) "your father?"

"No. Of course he wasn't. I haven't any father, I guess. He and the other two men stole me."

"Is this yours?" Chet held out the help message found by him in the cleft stick among the sage.

"Oh, goody!" The girl clapped her hands softly. "I shot it out of the arroyo with my bow. And I stuck a lot more in the walls, and left some signs there, too."

"I saw those," put in Phil promptly. "How did you stick in the sticks so high?"

"Shot them in with a little bow I made," she explained. "When I was riding past and when the men weren't looking."

"And you wrote on the walls, didn't you?" pursued Phil.

"That was a sign to show which way I was travel-

ing, and to ask help. I didn't have any more paper, so I put pieces of my handkerchief in the arrows. I read all about such things in an old book the men had, where white people had been captured by Indians."

"It was mighty smart of you," blurted Chet.

"Smarter than I was," confessed Phil.

"Yes. We read your word in the arroyo backwards—'p-l-e-h' instead of 'help,'" supplemented Phil. "Until we guessed right."

"When I was drawing the girl there my horse started up right in the middle, and I had to put half of her on one spot and half on another," she explained further.

"That fooled me, too," confessed Phil. "They looked like brands."

"After you'd seen me in the first arroyo, when you were lost, then I knew I'd get rescued some time. I tried to make a signal to you, but the men watched me too close."

"I'd almost met you before that. 'Twas one evening when all of you were camped by a spring at the foot of a rock, up in the timber. And they tried to shoot me."

"Oh—and were you the boy they chased? It was Joe, the lame man, who shot at you. He's awful. He'd as soon kill a person as not. I tell you he was mad that night. So were they all. They were scared, too, because they'd been overheard. And in the arroyo, when you came upon them the next time, they were suspicious. After you'd gone they were

sorry they hadn't kept you, and they said the next chance they would. They've got your watch."

"Oh, have they? How'd they get it?"

"Didn't you lose it, that time when you ran and they chased you? Well, Foley, the one-eyed man, found it, and he's wearing it. It's gold, isn't it?"

"Maybe you'll get it back sometime, again," proposed Chet.

"I will if I can," agreed Phil, determinedly.

At any rate this was better than if the watch was lying in the timber, exposed to all weathers. Now he at least knew where to look.

"How long they had you?" queried Chet, curiously, of the girl.

She gave a characteristic shrug.

"I don't know," she said. "It's about all I can remember—being with them."

"You don't talk as if you'd been raised with such folks," proceeded Chet. "You talk like Phil, here. Reckon they must have stole you."

In deprecating fashion she shrugged again and lifted her eyebrows.

"Did they beat yuh?"

"Some. The lame man was the worst. He bossed the others. I was afraid of him. I wish it was he up there instead of Jack, because he'll follow and try to get me again."

She shivered.

"Only wish he would—and that other man, too," declared Phil. "Then *we'd* get *them*."

"Somebody's coming. Listen!" prompted Chet,

who all this time had been sitting with eyes and ears intent upon the outskirts around and about.

"Oh, dear!" murmured the girl, apprehensively.

"It's Pete and Haney," returned Chet, who had been standing and peering, rifle in hand.

The two rode up. Haney bore a spade across his shoulder, and wore his hat again.

"Those other fellows haven't showed themselves yet?" asked Pete.

The boys shook their heads.

"They won't, then."

"No; their business lays 'tother side the range, jes' now," remarked Haney, grimly.

They passed on, to the hillside. Phil tried not to look, and when they returned he asked no questions, nor did Chet, but joined in driving the horses out of the rude corral. With the loose stock before (there were, as said, the truants from the herd, and half a dozen others) the party rode soberly away—the empty saddle in the midst of the little herd constantly suggestive. Phil tried not to imagine the dead man left behind, under the sod and rocks of the sunny slope, that sarcastic smile (no doubt) still upon his face.

It was Pete the cook who commented first.

"Well, boys," he said, "I didn't do it until I had to. See here." He removed his great hat. A bullet hole was discovered low in the crown.

Haney noted it gravely. Chet uttered "Gee!"

"He had as good a burial as we could give him," soliloquized Pete, replacing his hat; and his hand

trembled. "And once he may have been a good man; good as any of us. But he sure was in bad company, an' he acted queer. Hope his mammy never knows."

"It's the law of the range," said the Texan, grimly.

And Phil thought that either expression would make a fit epitaph for that lonely grave: "He was in bad company" or, "It's the law of the range."

"When we see the coroner or sheriff we'll tell him," remarked Pete. Whereupon, with this, the subject was dismissed.

They jogged on. The girl related her history, adding little to what she had already told. The main real news came from Haney.

"Got a sure-'nough hawss jingler at camp now, Smith-Jones," he said. "Caught us on the march. Reckon you'll have to go to punchin'."

"Who? That kid Henry hired?" asked Chet.

"Yes, suh."

"Bully!" exclaimed Chet. "Phil can ride with me, then."

CHAPTER XXIII

MISTRESS CHERRY JOINS THE CAMP

At the wagon Pepper was turned loose, and the horse that had been ridden in flight by the man with the frozen smile also was stripped of accoutrements.

"Purty good saddle," observed Haney.

"Cheyenne?" queried Pete.

"Ogden."

"Well, can't tell by a man's saddle where he's from. Not these days."

"Cain tell where the hawss is from, tho', right quick," retorted the Texan. "That Key brand come out o' Texas. Know the ranch an' all about it."

"He bought that horse," put in the girl. "Truly he did. He said so. I heard him. He bought him because he was a racer."

"Have to take youah word foh it, Miss," responded Haney, but not convinced.

"Anybody want one o' these guns?" asked Pete.

"Ain't got no way o' carryin' it," averred Haney. "Leave 'em in the wagon. Smith-Jones here'll fight foh us with his fists; won't you, Smith-Jones?"

"Nobody's goin' to bother yuh, anyway," said the cook. "Those fellows won't come out in the open."

"Joe (he's the one who limps) is awful mean, tho'," insisted the girl. "He doesn't ever give up."

"Better take my rifle, then," advised the cook.

"Here," and he handed it across to Phil, as the nearest; while Chet, who had but a moment before relinquished it, looked disappointed. "I've got this other one an' a six-shooter."

They left Pete to follow with his wagon; preceding, they added their loose horses to the herd (which they found intact, awaiting) and continued upon the route for Coyote Springs. To Phil one direction in this strange country was the same as another; the change of destination from Big Piney to Coyote was immaterial. He and the girl rode at the rear of the herd; the red-headed Haney had the left flank, Chet, in shaggy chaps, the right.

The region traversed was flat mesa, sagy and warm, sprinkled with cedars and an occasional stunted pin oak, all under a sky of intense soft blue amidst which floated lightly a few cottony clouds. Peace ruled again. Phil, jogging on, rifle across saddle, despaired of any call to arms. But the possession of the gun imbued him with a feeling of responsibility. 'Twas a real rifle this; he had witnessed it in action. And its weather-worn and service-worn condition, as he examined it minutely, impressed him.

Thus, watchful, ready, the guardian of the trail, he rode behind the herd, with the sensation of being an emigrant on the outlook for Indians. The girl beside him chatted happily.

It was past noon when Haney went galloping around and on ahead; and unexpectedly the camping place had been reached: a bunch of men lolling about, Haney and a strange youth holding a rope corral.

After the pack animals had been relieved of their burdens the strange youth, who proved to be the long absent wrangler, prepared to take the herd out again. But first he must join in the conversation which floated to him as the loquacious Pete, aided by Chet, began to narrate the adventures of the morning.

"You ought not to have let 'em rope you off your hawss that way," he advised Phil wisely.

"How could I help it?" retorted Phil, nettled by the patronage.

"You ought to've been watchin' out. And say, your stuff's in the depot at the Junction, with a whole lot to pay on it, too."

Having thus delivered himself of counsel, and of news, with a little swagger in his business-like mien he proceeded with the cavvy.

"That lad's too fresh," remarked somebody, reflectively.

Silence gave assent. Bud, the new youth, already had been appraised at his true value. However, Phil was glad to know about the baggage.

Coyote Springs was a small shallow basin in the open, containing at its center a pool of stagnant water about the size of a hogshead, held as in a cup by the rocks.

The water had to be dipped very carefully, so as not to stir it up; and anyway it was rather wriggly. But it was the only supply in the vicinity.

By the time Pete had dug his fireplace and, while his fire was being built, had unpacked his "tools," the story of Phil's encounter and the events that followed

had been recited to all comers. The first curiosity over the arrival of the girl merged into a lively uncertainty as to what should or could be done with her. This was a topic which seemed to be of more importance than the tragedy of the hill slope; that was past history, this was present. The man with the frozen smile had brought his end upon himself.

"Can't take her down to the ranch and leave her," said Mr. Simms, puzzled. "Nobody there but the cat."

"If we could get her over to the Junction my wife'd take care of her," said Henry (who was married); "only, she ain't at home. She's visitin' her folks."

"Well, don't see how we can keep her 'round camp," grumbled Old Jess. "This ain't no place for women or girls. Can't be ketchin' an' saddlin' hawsses for 'em all the time."

"Thank you. I can catch my own horse, and I can saddle him, too," flashed Mistress Cherry, indignantly, who chanced to overhear this remark. "And I can throw a rope, and do lots of things. You needn't be afraid that I'll bother *you*!"

"Oh! Excuse me, ma'am," proffered Old Jess, meekly.

"And I can cook, too," she continued.

"Humph! One cook's all we can stand," rejoined Old Jess.

"You bet. If I ain't cook enough for this outfit, I'm ready to leave," declared Pete, tartly. "Won't have anybody, he or she, messin' 'round *my* things."

It was Ford who gallantly came to the rescue in this social crisis, and filled the breach.

"I move you," he said, standing and extravagantly taking off his hat, "it be the sense of this camp that seeing Miss Cherry can rope and ride and cook and is an all-'round hand she be retained indefinitely."

"Specially sence she fetched her own string, as if she counted on stayin' a while," added Haney softly.

"Might put her at the Dober ranch. Reckon they'd keep her," proposed Buster.

"Please let me stay here," faltered the girl. "Please. I'll do anything—and some of you'll be good to me."

"Y-yes," stated Mr. Simms, slowly; "I second Ford's motion. She might as well stay with the camp, now she's here. Chet and I'll look after her. Come here, honey," he bade. He put his arm about her shoulders, and gazed upon her wistfully. "After roundup and summer camp, how'd you like to go back to the Bar B ranch with Chet and me, and be our girl, against the time we find your own folks?"

"I'd like it," she replied simply. "You'd be good to me."

"And you'd be good for us," he smiled. "It's pretty lonesome without a bit o' she-stock 'round to show us manners. Chet needs something o' that kind, and so do I."

"Hurrah!" cried Chet, jubilantly. "I'll teach——"

"You wait," admonished his father. "Mebbe she'll teach *you*."

And thus the girl was adopted; henceforth as "Cherry" to Mr. Simms and Chet, Philip and Ford; and as "Miss" and "ma'am" to the others, she was accepted by the camp—Old Jess and Pete speedily, if gruffly, betraying their pleasure also at the arrangement.

She did not know how long she had been with the three rustlers. She believed that the man with the limp had her first—but back of him her recollection seemed not to extend. Yet she evinced tokens of culture. The roughness of manner and speech with which she had been surrounded had not infected her. She proved to be a sweet, bright girl, extraordinarily independent. That she was smart Phil and Chet had early decided as soon as they had appreciated her signs. And her flipping of her braids to call Chet's attention—that *sure* was smart!

A few hours' stay in the camp changed Cherry's appearance considerably. Like a waif kitten which has found a home she immediately proceeded to clean up.

Haney the Texan without saying a word beforehand got out the cone-shaped little dog-tent which he was packing in case of rain and set it up.

"That's youah tent, now, Miss," he informed.

Whereupon she promptly retired into it with water and soap and towel (so much water that Pete was aghast—"Didn't have that toted to take a bath in!" he remonstrated) to emerge fairly abloom. The grime had vanished. Phil's discarded hat (much superior to her own old one) was perched becomingly

upon her crown, and at Ford's suggestion she had been supplied with a pair of overalls: Chet's—large, but clean!

"Reg'lar cowgirl, now, shuah," congratulated Haney, while the camp all gazed admiringly.

"Here—I give you dees," exclaimed the impulsive Hombra. "I buy heem down Sierra la Luz, where I leev. Mexican."

He had been rummaging in his bed pack, and now he handed her a beautiful pair of cowboy boots, of soft brown leather and red tops decorated with silver filigree.

"Goat skin," he quoth. "Wear 'em. They fit. See?" and he thrust forth his own foot, as small as any girl's. "Bueno," he grinned, when she had donned them. "I mek you spurs, too, sometime."

Thus by one and another was Cherry outfitted—not omitting quilts and blankets for a bed. Her old clothing which she did not need she disdainfully flung away.

Quite unexpectedly to himself Phil shared in the distribution of things. There was not much riding done during the remainder of this day, for by the time dinner had been eaten 'twas the middle of the afternoon. As the men lounged about, the captured rifle was passed from hand to hand and casually examined.

"I reckon this is yore's," said Buster, gravely, extending it to Phil.

"No, it isn't," answered Phil, astonished. "Pete and Haney took it."

"Have one already," spoke Pete. "Don't want two."

"Never tote a gun, myself," quoth Haney. "'Fraid of 'em."

"Naw; it's yours, Phil," declared Chet, eagerly. "Everybody says so. You've been wanting a rifle."

"But——" Phil hesitated.

"Take it, boy," urged Mr. Simms. "You deserve it. They gave you a hard fall. Might have broke your neck."

Phil took it. Flushing with pleasure he turned it over and over, scrutinizing its every point. It was his first real rifle, and it seemed the more real to him because it was one of the spoils of war. He might have wished that he had not gained it through the death of a man—but in his hands it was safer to the community than when in a rustler's and bandit's. And this was the law of the range: that the undesirable habitant must leave, if not by one way then by another.

Chet joined him in the scrutiny. The gun was a .30-30 carbine, as light as a .22 target gun but very much more powerful. Its wood showed tokens of travels through brush, but the metal was free from rust, and the mechanism seemed to have been perfectly cared for. Evidently the owner had appreciated that a firearm to be a friend in need must be given proper care.

"Bet she shoots as good as mine," declared Chet, as they examined it.

"Now you come up to my hoss camp," invited

Hombre, with white teeth flashing from his sunny face. "We kill bear, lion, bob-cat—ever't'ing."

"They're up on the summer range, just as much," averred Chet. "I'll have my rifle there, too. We'll carry rifles when we ride. But you haven't got any scabbard."

"Take the one that belongs with it, off the saddle," proposed Pete, from his dishwashing.

"Take saddle and all," directed Mr. Simms. "Might as well have the whole outfit. That's your saddle and your bridle from now on."

"Sure," murmured several voices.

Phil scarcely could credit that he was at last on a footing with the other men. He examined the saddle and the bridle. They were in good condition—worn just enough, like the rifle, to avoid the suspicion which attaches to newness. In his equipment for the range Phil was now a veteran.

"Better give him the hawss, too," grunted Old Jess, whether in sarcasm or in earnest no one might tell.

"He belongs to Cherry's string," observed Mr. Simms, quietly.

"Don't belong to nobody's string, yet," corrected Pete. "Looks as if he belonged to the Key ranch, down in Texas."

"But he was bought. I heard them say so," declared Cherry.

"Cain't prove that, now, 'cause we buried the bill o' sale," drawled Haney.

"Didn't you search the man?"

"No, suh. Didn't have time. Coroner can do that, if he wants to."

"Well—we'll keep the hawss, along with those others that have strange brands, till we find the owners."

"Lookee here, Smith-Jones," directed Haney, who had been fingering the rifle with a certain aptitude and grimness which belied his allegations of ignorance as to firearms. "Got a notch in the stock; mus' have killed its man!"

Phil peered, horrified. But the notch was only a nick from a scratch, he claimed.

"Maybe," admitted the Texan. "But I reckon you'll go to fillin' it plumb full o' notches. Smith-Jones is suhtinly the bad name of a bad man."

"Put a notch in it right now, if yuh want to," grunted Old Jess. "Somebody's got to kill that critter."

For the cowboy Dick came riding in, leading at his rope end a stout red and white calf half grown. Behind, the Three I man urged it on.

"Meat foh the camp," murmured the Texan.

"Go ahead and try your gun, Phil," prompted Ford. "You'll never have a better chance."

"Ca'tridges are in the wagon," said Pete. "I unloaded it."

Phil hesitantly took the carbine from Haney.

"Here," said Ford. He slipped in a couple of cartridges—slim, wicked things—and restored the gun to Phil's hands. Still Phil hesitated. He hated to do the deed. It did not seem to him very credit-

able to shoot at a calf tied by a rope so that it was helpless. A calf was not "game," anyway.

"If it isn't shot it'll be knocked on the head," said Mr. Simms.

"Got to have meat for supper, boys," declared the cook. "Plumb out 'cept a little bacon."

"Give me the gun. I'll shoot," invited Chet.

But Phil, seeing that the calf was doomed, walked slowly toward it.

"Don't shoot into camp," warned Mr. Simms.

"No. Don't yuh go shootin' me, Smith-Jones," called Haney. "I might not laik it."

The calf sturdily standing with head lowered, facing the camp, eyeing its human enemies and panting after its endeavor to break its tether, now turned and faced Phil as he made a half circuit; followed him as if recognizing in him a new tormentor. Phil cocked the gun and raised it to his shoulder. He held the tip of the sight upon the center of the calf's forehead. A great pity for the innocent, defenseless animal welled within him, as his finger remorselessly tightened against the trigger. He could only trust that his shot was to be a shot of mercy.

One of those countless animals termed "dumb," which are reared but to die at the will of man, the calf felt in the round muzzle opening at it a menace. It lowed tremulously as if to say: "Do your worst."

Holding his breath for steadiness Phil fired. Almost before the slight recoil the calf had collapsed in a heap upon the ground, so instantaneous was its end. Phil was immensely relieved.

"Right to the center," quoth Dick, dismounting from his horse.

The little gun shot true.

"Hurt the brains any?" queried Pete, anxiously.

"Narry," asserted the Three I man. "Just blowed the top of its head open."

"Ought to be careful an' shoot 'em behind the ear," grumbled Pete. "Liable to scatter the brains all over. Brains are best part."

"Is it dead?" faltered Cherry, who had been standing with eyes shut tight and fingers in ears.

"Changed to veal shore now, Miss," informed Buster. "Goin' to eat him up next."

"Poor thing," said Cherry, opening her eyes, but looking away.

The men dressed the veal and hung it in the branches of a cedar, with a tarpaulin over it.

"For seventeen years I rode with a Winchester under my leg," announced Mr. Simms, the veteran. "Rarely carry a gun, now. You'd better leave your gun in the wagon, boy. It'll be ketching on the brush, you'll find, and may cause you trouble when you're running an animal through the timber."

The work of the roundup proceeded. 'Twas riding, riding, riding, o'er slope and level, through cedar and sage, gravel and clay and alkali, while the saddle grew hot and throat and eyes grew parched, and the sun beat hard and dust enveloped, and man and horse perspired together in fretful activity. Ever the cattle, unwilling mother and unruly bachelor, frightened little calf and burly bull, were routed from their

chosen coverts and drifted across the country to join, bawling, with the bunches gone before.

"They're going to brand the calves to-morrow," informed Chet.

The Coyote Springs camp was a thing of the past, and now the roundup was moving on. Like any full-fledged cowboy Phil, sitting his own saddle, aboard Medicine Eye, by the side of Chet his partner, was helping with the drive of the gather from the Coyote territory.

"Oh!" said Cherry. "Then I shan't watch."

Keeping close to the two boys, she had overheard. A good range-girl Cherry had proved. She could catch her horse out of the rope corral, and could do her own saddling and bridling. She could ride as far as anybody; Chet and Phil found out that she required no odds, when she accompanied them. But she would not watch a branding. Whenever a maverick was to be thrown, she was absent.

All that day the march continued. The wagon and the horse-herd were ahead. Behind, the gather followed, constantly increasing as from right and left fresh batches of animals were added. At noon halt was made, where the wagon had stopped, for a waterless cold lunch in a grassy basin.

The only excitement of the route was caused by a sharp-horned steer who, pausing to fight upon a narrow passage, was shoved off into a narrow sink-hole. Wedged at the bottom, ten feet down, he was helpless. First a spade was used, in an attempt to dig a slope which he might ascend. But such a plan proved

too slow; and while Ford, with the spade, carelessly afoot, watched, and Phil held his breath, and Cherry vainly expostulated, by eight ropes upon his horns as many horsemen, pulling all together, hauled him out bodily. It seemed as if the steer would have his neck dislocated; but amidst a cheer he came scrambling, grunting to the rim. A moment he stood confused and irresolute. The men hastily cast off, as they might, one after another.

"Wait! Wait!" appealed Ford, suddenly realizing his predicament. For his horse he raced, in his chaps, spade across shoulder, and with a snort the steer, seeing redly, charged him.

A slight cheer started; but the situation was too perilous. Haney's rope snapped; the steer was free—when Buster, racing by, leaning from the saddle grabbed the trailing portion, turned short, braced his willing horse, and threw the steer head under heels, whether he broke its neck or no. A clever, dashing piece of work, this, by Buster.

The steer lay stunned. And by the time, with all ropes removed and Ford safely horseback, it staggered to his feet, its ungrateful resenting of things human had cooled to normal.

Everybody could laugh now; even Ford.

"That ol' steer's naik is a full foot longer than it used to be," declared Haney.

"Grew longer still, a-reachin' out to prod Ford," chuckled Dick.

"By thunder, if it had been an inch or so more 'twould have got him, too!" asserted Mr. Simms.

Across a high and tangled ridge where the wind blew icily toiled the drive, to pour down upon the farther side. This was hard riding, through the brush; tongues were hanging far, calves were lagging and cow and steer were continuously turning aside, to rest. But the end was near. Amidst the slanting shadows the herd traversed a level draw, which opening out displayed to view another mass of cattle scattered through and peacefully grazing or dully staring.

This was the result of the first camp's gather. The drive quickened. But leaving it, with a whoop of joy the riders all swung out around it, and galloped madly past both herds to unsaddle at the mess wagon, waiting there beyond.

To-morrow was the branding. Spread out through the sage the camp slept soundly, men and boys beneath their tarpaulins, Cherry inside her dog tent, preparing for the next task. The tired newcomers among the cattle needed no night-herding, the others were content, and the horses were well pastured, well watered, not inclined to stray. So the camp, from Pete the cook to Bud the wrangler, might sleep, and sleep at peace.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BRANDING OF THE CALVES

THE draw opened between steep sandstone cliffs into the usual sage and greasewood flat; and here opposite the mouth the camp had been located. For the wagon had halted near the high bank of a muddy creek, and where the chuck-wagon was, camp was.

"We'll hold 'em up against the rim-rock, boys," said Old Jess, as all, save cook and wrangler, rode out in the morning sun. Making a brave show, they trotted, then in a gallop they swept four abreast across the silver-gray brush, after their breather pulling their horses down to a walk.

Widely through the flat and draw were scattered the cattle; dropping aside by ones and twos the riders diverged right and left, seeking out the draw and all the ramifications thereof, and scouring the flat, until pouring in to a central point against the rim-rock wall by the mouth of the draw the cattle—old, young, cow, calf, steer and bull—formed a loose, uneasy, bellowing, parti-colored mass.

With Chet as partner, and accompanied by Cherry, Phil had done his share in the gather—upon Bowlegs swooping at glorious gallop to get in behind far-grazing animals; plunging through arroyo, leaping little ditch and badger-hole, crashing against tall sage

and greasewood; finally, after sundry chases of refractory beasts, turning them in the right direction.

Half a dozen of the men were now busy riding back and forth on the outside of the herd, heading off the members who were inclined to stray. Many of the cattle stood, inert; others, particularly mothers who had temporarily lost their children, roamed here and there, bawling; and these, and still others ever and anon set forth in deliberate attempt to leave their confines for some spot elsewhere.

Thus there was a constantly threatened leakage, stopped at every point by the riders.

Forty or fifty yards from the herd out on the flat Haney was chopping with an ax. Old Jess came riding from the camp with a bundle of stamp-irons—brands set at the end of four-foot rods—under his arm. Mr. Simms, the Flying U man and one or two others were building a bonfire of sage stalks and some larger pieces. Henry and Ford lay lazily near, as if their work was yet in prospect. The saddled horses of all stood dozing by. Bud the wrangler approached at a trot, snaking along a cedar stump.

“That’s right,” approved Old Jess, clanking down his irons. “You lads fetch in all the wood you can find. There’s a pile of it near the head of that arroyo yonder, where some old beaver dam was washed out. And there’s cedar on the mesas.”

“I know of a lot more,” said Bud, the consequential; and spurred away. Chet and Cherry together and Phil took different directions—Phil leaving to them the arroyo hoard. By the time the quota of all

had been delivered the fire was blazing, and the irons had been thrust in.

"That's enough," decreed Old Jess, gruffly, after the second trips. "Now we want a fire-tender and a tally man."

"I'll tend fire," announced Mistress Cherry.

Old Jess eyed her doubtfully with a "Humph!"

"Purty hot work," he grunted. "One o' you show this boy how to keep tally, then. He may have been to school but I reckon he never learned to read brands. Wrangler can help the gal tend fire, case she peters out on us."

Mr. Simms pulled out an envelope from his hip pocket.

"Who's got a pencil?" he invited.

The Open A man contributed a stub.

"Here, boy," directed the rancher. "Here are all the brands you're likely to have:  Bar B;  open A;  Lazy J;  Reverse R;  Flying U;  Triangle Cross;  Three I;  Boot. Mark 'em up opposite by fives—four straight lines and a diagonal."

"Like this—see?" put in Bud, prompt to air his superior knowledge. And he sketched in the dust 

The veteran cowman, ignoring him, drew his own diagram, even though identical, and Phil regarded that.

"Aw, I used to keep tally before I got to wranglin'," proclaimed Bud.

"Yes," drawled Mr. Simms; "and Phil used to wrangle before he was put to keeping tally."

"Wranglin's the bigger job," protested Bud, eagerly.

"Um-m-m," murmured the veteran. "It's just big enough to keep some people at it all their lives. That's their limit. Phil, here, 's a pretty good cow-hand already."

"He can't rope much."

"No; but he's got cow sense. That's the most important. Roping 'll come later."

To Phil the compliment seemed a little doubtful; yet he was grateful for the defense made in his behalf. Bud, as if perceiving a rebuke, flushed and would boldly have continued the discussion, but the cowman turned away, somewhat contemptuously; moreover, the business of the day was about to claim all attention.

In the saddle Ford and Henry waited. Old Jess drew out a branding iron, from the fire, and spat upon it to test its temperature.

"All ready?" remarked Ford. He turned Lonesome's head, and taking down his rope, recoiled it, riding leisurely to the herd. At a slightly different angle Henry, preparing likewise, also rode away.

On the edge of the herd Ford and Lonesome paused, and peered within. But immediately they started on again, Ford shaking out his loop, Lonesome with ears pricked, nose forward. The loop began to swing over Ford's head, in a beautifully regular elliptic; the reins hung loose upon Lonesome's neck,

who, ears still pricked, nose out, like a big dog following a hot trail, ambled persistently in the wake of a little white calf. The calf, suddenly vaguely alarmed to find itself being pestered, dodged from side to side of its mother, and she, also alarmed, shoved hither and thither, to lead it from the danger zone. But Lonesome—wise fellow—now that he had “spotted” his master’s choice, was not to be denied. Slowly and menacingly swung the loop until at a sudden opportunity, it shot lazily forward. Phil saw Ford jerk sharply upward; the rope tightened, like a fish line; Lonesome turned, of himself, and made at a quick walk for the fire, Ford sitting nonchalantly, half sideways, to give play to the rope stretched over his right thigh, while behind, hauled from the herd like a fish from a pool, plunging and bucking and baa-ing, followed the little white calf, caught by the neck. Just behind it came the old mammy, her nose almost touching its tail, on her blazed face a singularly worried, inquiring expression, as if she wondered what under the canopy ailed that child.

She halted, to gaze. Lonesome dragged the bounding calf nearer the fire. Dick and Buster ran to meet it.

“Bar B,” announced Ford.

Dick seized it, grabbed it by the neck and the slack of its flank, and with a deft lift and thrust of his knee flopped it flatly upon its side.

“One calf wrestled,” quoth Haney. “Tally him, Smith-Jones.”

Having “wrestled” it, Dick cast off the loop, he

and Buster sat at either end, and braced in the approved fashion held the animal, Old Jess bent over and with his knife, sniffed a piece from the ear, putting it in his vest pocket. Loudly bawled the calf. The Open A man firmly pressed a cherry-red stamp-iron to the flank. The hair smoked, the hide sizzled.

"Oh, I can't stand this!" declared Cherry; and running to her horse she was away in a jiffy, deserting her post.

Nobody had time to comment. Bud the wrangler proceeded to be sole fire tender.

"Triangle Cross," hailed Henry, dragging up his calf.

Another gang—Haney and Chet to do the wrestling or flanking, Mr. Simms and the Flying U man to do the marking and branding—hastened for it.

Phil scored a tally opposite the Δ $\dagger$ sign on his envelope.

"Lazy J," announced Ford, who, having re-coiled his rope, had made another round trip.

Dick and Buster pounced upon it.

"Three I."

"Boot."

"Bar B."

"Bar B."

"Lazy J."

"Flying U."

"Bar B."

"Lazy J."

"Reverse R."

"Open A."

In rapid succession the titles were proclaimed; but never once did Old Jess or Mr. Simms hesitate over an ear-mark. They knew instantly which applied to which. 'Twas to them like A, B, C. Thick and fast arrived the calves, for picking at first was easy. They arrived in all manner of positions—on their sides, on their backs, on their heads, or bracing their forelegs, depending how they were hooked. Ford and Henry seemed to care little where the loop fell, so long as it caught neck, leg or body. The mammy cows usually followed a little way, puzzled, and stood bewildered and anxious. Released from its ordeal, each calf ran blatting and unsteady back to find its mother, to be nosed and licked, and given a drink. Occasionally a spunky calf charged its late tormentors, as a parting token. And occasionally one arose so pitifully dizzy that it must be turned around by hand and pointed in the right direction.

Phil's envelope was becoming crowded—the number of Bar B rail-fence sections, each section representing five calves, being double that of any other. This was pleasing to him, as a Bar B man. The branding squads, particularly the flankers, were red and perspiring and weary. The herd, filled with smarting, cowed or indignant youngsters, was rife also with an angry, uneasy bellowing, as the steers and the three bulls smelled the blood.

The calves were coming to the fire with less regularity, now. The branding squads took turns tackling them.

“How many tallied?” demanded Old Jess.

Phil counted with his pencil. "Two hundred and six," he proclaimed.

"Gee!" commented Chet.

There was a lull. Ford and Henry were riding about through the herd, their loops hanging, their eyes searching for other victims. The branding squads had thrown themselves on the ground. Haney the Texan wiped his scarlet countenance with a limp bandanna only less scarlet.

"I move Smith-Jones wrastle the next calf," he said. "Too hahd work, this. Want to rest."

"All right. Here it comes," seconded Chet.

Henry was making another trip, bringing a candidate for initiation.

"She's a nice big one," said the Flying U man.

"Come along, Henry," encouraged the Texan. "Come a-runnin'. Smith-Jones is goin' to wrastle this one."

"Go an' grab it," bade Old Jess. "Yuh saw how it's done, didn't yuh?"

"Yes, I know," declared Phil.

He gave his tally to Chet, and advanced with a show of more confidence than he really felt. It was a large calf—an unusually large calf, stocky and active, caught by the neck and cavorting and maa-ing.

"Lazy J," called Henry.

"Grab him, Smith-Jones," exhorted Haney.

Phil darted in, crowded against the calf, and reaching over, tried to seize her, lift her and flop her. The operation had looked easy, but——!

The calf was soft and warm in his grasp. He

could feel its heart beating a wild pitty-pat under his fingers. Once, twice, thrice he lifted. The creature's hoofs left the ground a few inches, sprawled in all directions, but landed again practically as before.

"Heave ho!"

"Wrastle him, Smith-Jones."

"Go to it, boy!"

The calf bawled and struggled. From his saddle Henry gazed, smiling faintly. He waited.

"Somebody help him. Want my rope," he appealed, with plaintive, patient tone.

"Aw, I'll throw him," announced Bud, the wrangler, rushing in.

"Yuh won't throw *him*. That's a *her*," derided somebody—at which there were sniggers.

But at that instant, exerting more strength, Phil raised the calf high. It kicked furiously, and over he went backwards, calf on top. Bud flung himself forward. The spectators deliriously cheered. From the mêlée of calf and Phil the former had emerged, triumphant, and was bolting. Burning to distinguish himself, Bud now dived for it. The rope brought it up short and whirled about it met him head-on. Doubled over, face to its tail, behold the impulsive Bud a-straddle of the calf's neck and riding rapidly about the arena.

The near spectators were gasping with glee. From the horsemen gazing, on the edge of the herd, came whoops.

"Which way you goin', boy?" queried Haney.

"He ain't a hawss-jingler; he's a calf-buster," quoth Old Jess.

Staggering to his feet, regardless of his swollen lips and swimming head, Phil rushed gallantly to the rescue. The science of flanking was thrown to the winds; 'twas a rough and tumble. Bud sprawled off sideways; the calf rolled on top of him; Phil floundered a-top the calf, and presently out of the dust of hurly-burly, the panting and grunting and bawling, evolved calm and the sight of two exhausted boys lying across an exhausted calf.

"Somebody give me my rope," pleaded Henry. "I'm tired o' sittin' here."

"One calf wrestled; one hour," remarked Mr. Simms, grimly, as, with the others of his squad he moved forward to mark and brand. "Wouldn't get through a very big bunch in a day."

"What's the matter with your mouth, boy?" asked Dick.

"Calf put its foot right in it," accused Phil, dabbling gingerly.

"Case o' calf wrastlin' boy, that was," said Buster.

"Branded one hundred twenty calves in one hour once, where I was," drawled Haney, as he held the present victim's hind quarters. "Didn't nobody get kicked in the mouth, either," he added, slyly.

"That was using a corral, tho', wasn't it?" grunted Mr. Simms.

"Yes, suh. Corral, two ropers, plenty irons, lot o' flankers an' branders; all one brand—double quarter cuhcle."

"That's the last animal. Don't see any more," reported Ford, arriving from the herd.

"All right." Old Jess whoo-eeed to the horsemen riding herd, and waved them in. With a series of yelps they raced for camp and chuck wagon. "Guess they mus' reckon it's dinner time," commented Old Jess, with the flicker of a smile.

He kicked aside the embers, and began to stamp them out. The others aided. The stout calf, now much less spirited, was with her mammy, and being comforted.

"Say, but it must have kicked you!" giggled Chet, surveying Phil.

"I'd have wrestled him, but I didn't have a good chance," claimed Bud.

"Aw, if he hadn't had a rope on him he'd have run away with you!" jeered Chet.

"I've got to bring in the horses," announced Bud, thus excusing himself to gallop off.

"He's too fresh," declared Chet, to Phil. "You'd make a better hand than he would, now, and he's lived out here all his life. He's big on the tell, is all."

Squatting, Old Jess and Mr. Simms were gravely fishing bits of reddish fuzzy leather from their vest pockets and counting them.

"They's counting ears and dewlaps," said Chet, explaining.

"What's that tally?" again demanded Old Jess. Phil once more summed up.

"Two hundred and seven, now."

"That's right, ain't it?" suggested Old Jess, to his companion. "Hundred an' nine, mine."

"Ninety-seven, here," responded Mr. Simms, anxiously, exploring his pockets. His face lightened. "Oh, I know!" he remarked. "Forgot to save that last big fellow. They wrestled her so quick, sorter took my breath away!"

"Grub pi-ile," sighed Haney. He mounted. So did all, and rode for the wagon.

The herd, left to its own devices, slowly wandered.

"But supposing there isn't any mark," proffered Phil.

"All the stock in this district is marked," answered Ford. "But where there happens to be a brand without other mark I suppose the pieces would agree with their own brands and the tally would account for the rest."

"How do you tell what brand, every time?" persisted Phil.

"Tell by the old cow. Each calf takes its mammy's brand. We see what cow the calf sticks to, in the herd."

"But supposing the cow and calf have got separated."

"Well—that doesn't happen if we're all careful. There's a lot in handling a herd easily, and in cutting out without stirring it all up. You have to use cow sense."

So for the second time Phil heard the phrase; and he began to understand it.

Everybody had washed and dinner was being given final preparatory touches by Pete, before someone thought to ask, suddenly: "Where's the girl?"

"Sure. Where's Cherry?"

The camp looked about, at first languidly (for it was tired), then with more interest.

"She was almost a-top the mesa yonder, when I last seen her," said Pete. "Come to the wagon an' then rode off again."

A little thrill of apprehension stirred the camp; Old Jess rose to his feet, and peered. Mr. Simms started for the nearest horse of those that, with cinches loosened and lines down, were sleepily awaiting the arrival of the cavvy.

"There she comes," he said, relieved, turning back.

Down the gravelly side of the far mesa, and across the brush of the flat Cherry approached at a gallop.

Mr. Simms waved at her, once; and seated himself abruptly as if ashamed of such a display on his part.

"She hears the dinner-bell, I reckon," observed Buster, as all eyed her critically but not unkindly.

However, Cherry had another topic uppermost in her mind.

"A whole flock of sheep is over there, the other side," she proclaimed, excitedly. "I saw them and I talked with the herders, too."

"What's that?" ejaculated Mr. Simms.

With hasty exclamation, Buster and Dick sprang up. Others were about to follow.

"A great big lot of sheep, and four or five herders," repeated Cherry.

"Steady, steady, boys," cautioned Old Jess. "Let's hear the girl's story, first."

"No woolly ever is anything but mutton, on this range," decreed Buster, hotly. "Come on, boys."

"I'm with you," announced Pete, the cook. "Who'll lend me a hawss? Why don't that jingler fetch his bunch in, anyway?"

"Yes, wait a minute," urged Old Jess. "Now, girl, you say you saw sheep, did yuh?"

CHAPTER XXV

NO WOOLLIES ALLOWED

"YES, sir. Lots and lots of them."

"What were they doin'?"

"Eating and baa-ing," informed Miss Cherry, pertly.

"Uh." And two or three of the men chuckled.

"Were they travelin'?"

"Kind of, slowly."

"Whose outfit are they? Did yuh hear?"

"No, sir."

"Mexican herders?"

"I think so. One was, anyway."

"What hees name?" demanded Hombre, interested.

"I don't know, I'm sure," responded Cherry.

"Where they from. Did you find out *that*?"

"Utah, they *said*."

"What else did they say?"

"Oh, we talked a long time. I told them this was cattle country, and they'd better get out, and they said they had a permit to cross it and nobody could make them get out. And they asked me where the nearest water was, and invited me to stay to dinner, but I didn't."

"How fur do yu reckon that is, Miss, to where them sheep are?" asked Buster, coolly.

"Four or five miles, I guess."

"Jest a nice little canter," continued Buster. "Cook, keep my dinner warm half an hour or so, will yu?" He started toward his horse. "I'll fetch yu back a mutton. There'll be chili con carne all ready mixed, over yonder. Who's coming along to help pile up the woollies?"

The men, except Old Jess and Mr. Simms, made simultaneous movement—even Pete.

"If I can get a hawss I'll pick out my own mutton," he said, untying his apron. "Dinner's ready, for anyone who stays."

"Hold on," bade Old Jess, without rising. "Hold on, boys. Take your dallies. We'll 'tend to those sheep, but we won't stop roundup to do it."

"Chet, yu stay here," spoke Mr. Simms; and that was sufficient for the two boys.

"Didn't they say that nobody could make 'em get out?" demanded Buster, wrathfully. "Never a sheepman lived could give me that talk on my own range."

"We have it from the girl's lips, straight," supplemented Pete—as fierce as the fiercest, and now rummaging in the wagon, presumably for his rifle. "Who'll lend me a hawss?"

"No sheep stay on this range," declared several voices, supported by an assenting murmur.

"Come along, fellows," invited Buster, again starting. "If yu don't want to, I can clean 'em out alone. I ain't *beggin'* for help."

"Come back an' set down," ordered Old Jess,

testily. "Get off your hawss, gall. You've done enough for one day."

"Oh, I didn't mean to make trouble. They'll take the sheep away, I know, if you ask them to," pleaded Cherry, now appalled.

"Ye-es; we'll send 'em a special request, all done up in pink ribbon," drawled Haney.

"Write it on sheepskin," proposed the Open A man; and everybody laughed with hard, meaning emphasis.

"Set down; set down, all of yuh," reiterated Old Jess. "There comes the cavvy. We ought to change hawsses, anyway. Cook, you said dinner's ready, didn't yuh?"

"Pick out yore loadin' tools an' pitch in," answered Pete.

"Yes, boys, let's eat. Those sheep'll wait. They can't get away," argued Mr. Simms. "Must be middle of afternoon, already. I'm hungry."

"Two-thirty," informed Pete.

Half reluctantly the men followed the example of Old Jess and the veteran rancher, and first turning loose their horses to join the approaching herd, they each selected eating utensils, and proceeded to fill their plates and themselves. But by the resolute motion of their jaws as they chewed, it could be surmised that their wrath was only smouldering.

"Didn't notice what paint brand those sheep wore, did yu, Miss?" inquired Buster, gently.

"Some had a black K on their backs."

"It's an eastern Utah outfit, all right," stated the

Open A man. "I've seen it when I was ridin' that country."

With elaborate detail the men wiped up their plates, to the last vestige of gravy and sorghum, and as elaborately stacked them away. They fiddled about, lighting pipes, rolling cigarettes, in a covertly expectant fashion, killing time until a plan of action had been mapped out. Pete, the cook, as though still pugnacious, rattled his pots and pans irritably.

Old Jess arose and stretched. If he was conscious of antagonism in the air he did not betray himself.

"Get your hawsses, boys," he said. "We can move that herd up a mile or two an' start another gather over east."

"What about those sheep?" asked Buster, direct. "Yu thinkin' of lettin' sheep in on this range? If yu are, I quit."

"Me too," murmured voices.

Old Jess smiled, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Well, boys," he said, "you might all quit an' yuh wouldn't be hurtin' me, pussonally, at all. I don't own any o' the cattle. But you know well enough how much use I got for sheep. I've punched cows before some of yuh were born. What I reckoned was, a few of us would ride over to that sheep camp this afternoon and see what's what. No need of stoppin' the roundup. If a few of us can't persuade those sheep out, then the whole of us can take a hand."

"That's the proper course, boys," concurred Mr. Simms. "This is cattle range, and mostly Bar

B cows on it, too, so I've got as much interest as anybody and can smell a sheep as far. But we can afford to go slow; and if that outfit won't listen to reason, why then we can talk to 'em in a different way."

"They said they had permission," reminded Cherry.

"Permission——!" snorted Old Jess, impolitely. He had donned his chaps, removed for coolness and ease while eating; and now trailing his rope, waddled to the horse-herd.

The fresh mounts were roped out and saddled. Others pulled on *their* chaps—with a certain grim painstakingness as if foreseeing stern and disagreeable work.

"Seems to me if George and Buster and Henry and I ride over to that outfit it'll be enough," quoth Old Jess. "How about you, Buster? You reckon yuh can cool off an' let somebody else do the talkin'?"

Buster grinned.

"The rest o' you can push that herd up a little ways, an' make a short circle out east," continued the boss, swinging into his saddle.

"Can't we go with you?" appealed Chet, anxiously, half to his father and half to Old Jess.

"I'm not boss," reproved Mr. Simms, significantly.

Old Jess grunted. The sound might be interpreted either way, but Chet chose to take the chance.

"Come on," he said; and he and Phil and Cherry fell in behind.

"If there's any fun don't leave me out, boys," plaintively called Pete, as the party rode away.

Scarcely a word was spoken until they had mounted the mesa, in the direction whence Cherry had come; and were riding across the flat, sagy top.

"It's farther toward the left," called Cherry. "Down in a hollow. I didn't come straight."

"Hear 'em?" said Old Jess, presently. "Humph!"

"Can almost smell 'em!" responded Henry, in tone disgusted.

Phil strained his ears, and even his nostrils. It seemed to him that he could catch a faint, multitudinous murmur, distant ahead, rising and falling in a confused cadence.

"Believe I hear them, too," he exclaimed. "Is it that sing-song noise?"

"That's sheep," affirmed Chet, gravely. "There must be a big band of 'em."

"I said there was a lot, didn't I?" reproved Cherry.

"What will sheep do, in here?" asked Phil, curiously.

"They won't do anything. They won't have a chance," and Chet laughed shortly. "The range won't agree with 'em. This is cattle country."

"Don't they and cattle get along together?"

"Look at 'em, will yuh!" growled Old Jess, at that moment.

Horses picking way amidst the brush, they had been crossing the mesa at a sharp trot; and now they were upon the farther edge, with a view before and below of a shallow draw or swale. They paused to

survey. Louder and yet more confused drifted to Phil's ears that multitudinous murmur—and suddenly what he had taken for sage clumps, massed in the bottom and skirting the sides, resolved themselves into a thousand low bodies moving with a peculiar streaming effect, through the real sage. These were sheep, in three divisions following one another at a narrow interval; behind each division was a man afoot. On the outside, opposite the rear of the last division, was a man horseback.

Buster swore.

"Pushing right on, aren't they," remarked Mr. Simms.

Down the slope plunged the squad at a trot again—Phil minding not the jolting in the sudden fierce resentment communicated to him by the determined mien of the leaders. Without especial cause he found himself, all of an instant, hating sheep.

They broke into a gallop; and dashing through the middle band of the sheep, sending them baa-ing and affrighted right and left, the four men, apparently not at all averse to riding underfoot whatever animals got in the way, greeted by the angry barking of an indignant collie, pulled up before the herder in charge.

"Where's your boss?" demanded Old Jess, abruptly. The herder, a tanned stripling in broad hat, ragged blue overalls and brogans, looked upon them out of skimmed-milk eyes set in a slightly scared Scandinavian countenance, and said, without other emotion, jerking his head sideways:

“Over there.”

The dog growled. *He* met hostility with equal hostility, and as open. These people had acted impolitely, to say the least, and he told them so.

Through the next band of sheep the cowmen recklessly plowed—seeming to take delight in the dismay of their passage. Old ewes and wethers ran panic-stricken, little lambs bolted and dodged. The herder in charge of this detachment was a Mexican—squat and full-bearded and swart. He yelled, and shook a staff vigorously.

“You come out!” he protested. “What you mean, ridin’ through sheep that way?” His dog barked.

“Shut up, you greaser!” retorted Henry; and Buster jeered shrilly, half turning in his saddle to make a face.

These sheep bore large black K’s stamped upon their rumps, and upon the side of their noses, as their blank faces and cold yellow eyes turned up imploringly, was to be noted, in the majority of cases, a burned V. Ears were marked with a swallow fork.

The man on horseback, who, out of the corner of his eyes, must have witnessed the approach, rode along imperturbably, with lazy, loose seat. The party halted right athwart his path, and he, too, halted.

He was a thin, lank individual—even thinner and lanker than Pete, the cook—with small head and features and a very long neck rising out from a dirty gingham shirt which, unbuttoned half way down, ex-

posed a soiled undergarment. His overalls had crept well above his shoes resting loosely in the wooden stirrups, and the gap was filled with crumpled gray sock.

Between left leg and saddleflap was a rifle, in scabbard.

From under a disreputable derby hat, oddly topping his bullet head, he spat copious tobacco juice; with a flicker of keenness in his small hazel eyes surveying the intruders.

"Howdy," he said.

"How do do," spoke Old Jess, curtly. "Trailin' those sheep far?"

"So so." The man threw a leg over the horn of the saddle, and sat more comfortably. "Any water ahead?"

"Might be, if yuh reach it. Yuh know this is cattle country, don't yuh?"

"Is it?" The man extracted a well-gnawed plug and after a cursory inspection bit off a piece.

"Yes, it is. Yuh can't take your sheep through here, my friend."

"Where's your dead-line?"

"We don't need any dead-line. This is cattle range, an' nothin' *but* cattle range. That's enough."

"Not for me. I'm from Missouri," said the man, still cool. "Who are you?"

"We're running cows on this very ground," put in Mr. Simms, also curtly. "If you don't know it you ought to know it—and I reckon we can 'show' you, mighty quick."

"You bet!" supplemented Buster. "Yu or any other sheep outfit."

"No objection to our crossin' through, have you?" asked the man, unmoved.

"Yes, sir." Old Jess' reply was very prompt. "We object, an' we object a heap. Yuh can't do it."

"Hate to disoblige you," asserted the man, with the trace of a smile on his weazened countenance. He spat. "This is government reserve land, ain't it? Reckon we have as much right on it as you have. An' I got a permit to cross, anyway."

"Who gave it to you?"

"A couple o' rangers we met."

"A couple o' rangers!" Old Jess laughed sarcastically—and his party joined in, Phil and Chet loudest of all. "You're mistaken, my friend. This ain't reserve, an' you didn't meet no rangers for it. Where's your permit?"

The lank, bullet-headed horseman lazily pulled a slip of paper from his hip pocket, unfolded it and held it up in the palm of his hand.

"There she is. I call your bluff." He tucked it back in his pocket again.

"This ain't reserve, an' there ain't no rangers. We cow-punchers do all the rangin' that's necessary," said Buster, hotly.

"That's right," supported Henry.

"What kind o' lookin' men?" inquired Old Jess.

"A one-eye, an' a man with a little black mustache."

"Lame?"

"Dunno. Didn't *ride* lame."

"Oh, I know!" exclaimed Cherry, who had been listening with eyes and ears. "That was Foley and Joe. *They* aren't rangers," she added, disdainfully. "They did that just for meanness."

"Friends o' yourn?" inquired the sheepman, amiably.

"You'd better get rid o' that dockyment mighty quick," advised Old Jess. "Those two fellers ain't rangers at all. 'Cordin' to your description, they're common rustlers."

"What'd they give me a permit for, then?"

"Jes' to make trouble. This range ain't healthy for *them*, an' they thought they'd leave us a sheep-job."

"Naw, they ain't rangers," concurred all. "They fooled you, mister." A grim laugh went 'round—save that the sheepman only imperturbably chewed, smiling not.

"Well, boys," he remarked, throwing his leg into position again, upon the opposite side of the horse, "adios to you. I'll have to ketch up with those sheep. How far to water, did you say?"

But the rank before him opened not. Old Jess, Mr. Simms, Buster and Henry sat ranged closely, hedging his advance.

"Hold on, friend," bade Mr. Simms. "You going to turn back, did *you* say?"

"No, I didn't. Why?"

"Count on going through with 'em, do yuh?"

"Certainly do."

An ominous murmur swept through the little squad. The veteran cowman compressed his lips and sternly shook his head.

"You'll never make it," he declared.

"No water?"

"Too many men!"

"How so?"

"This is cow-range. We've told you that several times."

"We won't hurt your range. We're simply crossing for the short cut of it. There's grass enough for that, an' for your cows too."

The atmosphere had suddenly waxed tense again. Tempers were strained, and word, spoken and unspoken, clashed with word.

"No, sir. There is not. We know what a 'short cut' for sheep means. Once sheep get into a country, by hook or crook, you never get 'em out. They 'cross' a little wider and a little wider, and fust thing yuh know they're crowding out the cattle. No sheep 'crosses' through the Owl Creek or the Steeple country—do they, boys?"

"Not in a hundred years," declared Henry.

"Sheep have as much right in here as cattle, I take it." The horseman's tone was steady, his mien unruffled. Phil could not help but rather admire how he sat, giving not an inch nor the quiver of an eyelash, in the midst of the angered half-circle. "What's *your* claim on the whole country?"

"Thirty years' possession. That's been enough to date, and I suspect it isn't outlawed yet. Possession

is nine points o' the law, friend—and the tenth point we can produce, on occasion.” Mr. Simms tapped his hip suggestively. “I reckon you'd better trail your woollies out 'o here, the way they came in.”

“No, I reckon different.” The sheepman met the cowman's look squarely. His little eyes had a latent blaze of defiance, and the poise of his bullet-head upon his long neck stiffened. Otherwise he was ostensibly as negligent as ever. “I've had orders to make this short cut, an' I'm goin' to do it. We're late, now, off the lambin' grounds, an' we're due on the summer range. We won't hurt your forage. We'll push right along. But it's too late for us to back out. I'm sorry to disoblige you, boys; but because you run cattle over a country is no sign you own it. We've as much right in here as you have. But we're not here to stay; we're just passin' through.”

“Yes, 'passin' through'!” derided Old Jess. “An' after you another bunch 'll be 'passin' through,' an' another, till the whole country 'll stink so of sheep that no white man can live in it.”

“Supposin' I go on to the next water. Then we can have another talk.”

“No next water; no talk. We've palavered plenty already,” asserted Mr. Simms. “Your sheep stop right here.”

“But, my God, man!” protested the other, with abrupt alarm, “those sheep got to have water. I can't trail 'em all the way back to the last water. It's a day behind.”

"Can't help that," responded the cattleman, hard as flint. "You're in a bed of your own making. The quicker you get back to that water, then, the better."

"I'll kill off my sheep for no outfit," declared the other, doggedly.

"Do you own 'em?"

"No. I'm foreman, tho', an' I'm here to see they get fair treatment."

"Yu seem anxious to have 'em piled up on yu, jest the same," put in Buster.

"I'll 'tend to the pilin' up," retorted the sheepman, with that flicker of the eyelid which denoted his temper. "By you or by anybody else. But they sha'n't die o' thirst."

"Come on, boys," quoth Old Jess, wheeling his horse. "We've given him his chance. We'll come again."

"Yes—an' we'll come a-shootin'," boasted Buster.

"When you come we'll be ready for you," called the sheepman.

Away dashed the cow-camp party, heading whence they had come. The sheep, reorganized by the herders after the late demoralization caused by the reckless passage of the riders through their midst, were some distance up the draw, pursuing their onward way. Over their backs floated a dust, golden in the westering sun. The barking of the dogs and the shouting of the herders, mingled with the myriad baa-ing from five thousand throats, wafted through the still air. Looking back Phil saw that the sheep-

man, now at a trot, was overtaking his outfit. He was plucky, that chap. He had been intimidated not a speck, but had stood his ground.

Buster was commenting wrathfully, for whomever might listen.

"That fellow has his nerve. He certainly is from Missouri," commented Mr. Simms.

"We'll 'show him,' all right," declared Buster. "We'll 'show him.' We'll pile those sheep so high they'll look like a snowy range."

"Seems a pity," quoth Old Jess. "But we gave him his chance."

"They'll likely camp at the end of the draw. There's a water-hole there."

"Yes. They'll have to. Some o' those ewes were about all in with thirst."

"They'll spoil that water so no decent animal will drink there for a month," scolded Buster.

"What are they going to do next?" asked Phil of Chet.

"Who?"

"Our outfit."

"We'll get out to-night, I bet, an' pile 'em up."

Phil pondered.

"What's that?" he ventured.

"Aw, ride back and forth through them shooting and running 'em down," explained Chet, with savage emphasis. "Nobody's going to get sheep into *this* country. It's cow country. Three years ago another outfit tried it and the boys piled up two thousand and the rest were stampeded into the brush so they

never *were* gathered again. We all had lamb and mutton for six months!"

"What a shame!" exclaimed Cherry, indignantly. "The poor things! It isn't their fault."

"Sometimes the herders get killed, too, unless they keep out of the way," proceeded Chet. "But they usually take to the brush themselves at the first shot."

"I think it's a shame!" reiterated Cherry.

"Then they've no business bringing sheep in."

"The poor defenseless things! What harm do they do?"

"Who? The sheep?" Chet sputtered angrily. Bred in the school of the open range, he could take only the cowman's view. "They kill the forage. They eat it so close that nothing else can live on it, not even deer. A cow and horse won't even try to graze where sheep have been, and they won't drink after sheep, either. They don't like the smell. It takes about fifty acres, here in the mountains, to support a cow. Dad says that about thirty used to do, down on the plains. When the sheep come in they drive the cattle out, for they eat so close they can live where a cow can't. Everybody hates woollies—that is, everybody but the fellows who own them, and they hire herders and don't do the work themselves. You bet no sheep get in here, to stay long."

"But these just want to pass through."

Chet snorted.

"Aw, that's the old trick," he flouted. "First a bunch passes through. Then another bunch follows, but has to take a little different trail, because the

forage has been cleaned out. Pretty soon a bunch camps for a day or two—and first thing you know the range is *sheep* range, and that's the end of cattle."

"Are you going along to-night when they pile them up?" queried Phil.

Chet answered promptly.

"Sure! It'll be fun. We'll all go. I wish I had my gun."

"Maybe the sheep people will shoot back," suggested Phil.

Chet was no whit alarmed.

"They'd better not," he blustered. "Buster and Dick and the other boys would as soon fix a sheepherder as a coyote. I hate to have the dogs hurt, tho'," he added. "But they generally are."

Cherry said not a word. Only, as she rode, a vivid red spot glowed in each cheek, and her lips were pressed tightly together.

CHAPTER XXVI

MISTRESS CHERRY TO THE RESCUE

"WHAT I don't savvy," remarked the Open A man, "is why those rustlers headed this sheep outfit in here with a fake permit—acceptin' that there is a permit."

"He only showed us a piece of paper," said Buster. "That was jest a bluff. He an' any other sheepman knows there can't any ranger give a permit to cross cattle country."

"But s'posin' those two fellers fooled him. Why?" persisted the Open A man.

"There are some people in this world naturally plumb mean, I reckon," averred Mr. Simms. "They like to stir up trouble. Those two fellows are getting driven out o' the district; we've touched 'em up pretty bad already, and they're just sore enough to strike whatever they can, around in a circle like a mad rattlesnake. If they can bother us with sheep, and hurt the range and get us into a fix some way, they'll do it."

"It's kinder hahd on the sheep," murmured Haney.

"Yes, it sure is," agreed somebody.

But despite this opinion no token of relenting from hostility against the invader flock was evident in the camp. The men had eaten, and now in the long rays of the sun, slanted across from the crest of the west-

ward mesa, they were lounging about relaxed and lazy; only Pete was busy, washing the dishes, occasionally joining, with his characteristic freedom, in the conversation. But although the scene was one of peace, ominous preparation for action was visible.

"You men who'll want your hawsses had better save 'em out o' the herd before the wrangler gets away with it," had prompted Old Jess, quietly.

"Somebody loan me a hawss," appealed Pete. "Say, save me one, somebody. I want to be in on this picnic."

The herd had come in and gone again (wrangler Bud protesting that he would hurry back, and that the "crowd" must wait for him), leaving behind it a score of horses picketed to the brush.

Following Chet's example Phil had roped out Pepper; reluctantly, but bound to do as the rest: and much to the camp's amusement Cherry likewise had reserved a mount.

"Looks like this camp is unanimous," commented Old Jess. "You'd better stay at home, gal," he advised bluntly.

"All alone? I'm afraid," objected Cherry.

"Got two boys to look after yuh."

"Who? Us?" Chet spoke up quickly "Naw, sir! We're going, too. Phil wants to see the fun as much as anybody."

Old Jess, with his usual non-assenting grunt, accepted the mutiny. He had delivered his say, and did not intend to assume further supervision of juveniles.

Mr. Simms added his word.

"You're better off at camp, all three of you," he spoke. "You'll just be in the way and you're liable to be hurt. It's no pleasure trip; it's a bad business."

But with this speech he, too, was done. In the open West people travel their own road, to profit by experience. And the two boys must live and learn, like everybody else. As for Cherry—well, a girl in a cow-camp was a problem new to this range.

"Ought to have more shootin' irons, hadn't we?" volunteered Pete, cheerfully, now having finished his dishes, and advancing, sociably inclined.

"Might do a more thorough job," agreed several.

"Ride 'em daown; ride 'em daown," drawled Haney the Texan. "Raid 'em good an' plenty an' they'll never bothuh any moh this year. Don't laike shootin', me."

"Oh, we'll have guns enough, I reckon," quoth Mr. Simms. "Somebody can take the boy's."

"Yes; I don't want it," proffered Phil, without hesitation.

"I'll use it," volunteered Chet, the bloodthirsty.

"No, you won't." His father was emphatic. "You'll go empty-handed. Otherwise you'll be putting a hole in a good hawss or someone's leg instead of a sheep."

"Yes; a sixty-dollar horse or a forty-dollar puncher, Chet," supplemented Ford.

"It would serve you right," declared Cherry, flatly, from the spot where now for some time she had been silent. "Killing a lot of poor defenseless sheep!"

Various eyes surveyed her with calm, dispassionate gaze, as if politely weighing her remark.

"You're going along," hazarded a voice, slyly.

To this and to the chuckle that followed Mistress Cherry made no retort.

Bud the wrangler arrived breathless, at a trot, but found that his haste was unnecessary, for the camp was just as he had left it. Dusk settled.

"There's no law against a man gettin' what sleep he can, is there?" said the Boot rider. He arose and strolled to his bed. "Who'll wake me?"

"All o' yuh go to bed. I'll wake yuh," vouchsafed Pete the cook, affably.

"Pete wants to make sure we don't sneak off on him, some way," explained Mr. Simms, amidst the general scattering to the nightly nests.

"Come on. But don't you let 'em leave us while we're asleep," adjured Chet.

"How long will they wait?" asked Phil, nonplussed, as sitting upon his bed he pulled off his boots.

"'Bout midnight, maybe. Till things have quieted down at the sheep camp and the moon's up."

Beneath his tarpaulin Phil lay for some time awake. Chet's adjuration of watchfulness seemed to have placed a responsibility upon him—Chet being an extraordinarily sound sleeper. The project afoot also worried him. He was loyal to cow-land and cow-man—for was he not a puncher, himself, riding for the Bar B?—but he wished that there was some other way of getting rid of those sheep without maltreating them. He kept seeing their servile mien,

their coward yellow eyes looking up in such apprehension out of their blank faces, their confused running to and fro with no attempt upon the part of any mother to protect her child; and he agreed with Cherry that the foray was one not to be proud of. Even Mr. Simms had said it was a "bad business."

Nevertheless, evidently it had to be done. The range demanded. Ford had made no objection. The peace-loving Haney had grimly supported the measure. Perhaps it was not so severe as it sounded. At any rate, in Rome one did as the Romans. Cherry thought even branding cruel—but *it* had to be done, too. Still, the sheep were so utterly defenseless, and they had been forced in here—they could not help themselves—he hoped that not many would be hurt—or anybody killed—what queer yellow eyes and white lashes they had—and how fat and comical were the lambs—he wished that he and Chet weren't going—Cherry didn't want to—what would his mother say?—but, still, he was a cowboy, and sheep spoiled the range—to "pile 'em up" was the only way, wasn't it?—nobody *liked* to, except maybe Buster and Pete, and they were hot-headed—hee-hum—he must be careful not to let Chet and himself sleep through—though he wouldn't mind, for himself—perhaps they had been taken out, already, those sheep—hurrah, if they had—perhaps—perhaps——

He must have dropped off. For from a confusion of running sheep, all with basilisk yellow eyes, and shouting, shooting riders, he was transported as abruptly as the snapping of a thread to find himself

half sitting up, among his covers, staring wildly into the brush; with a gibbous moon low in the sky before him, about him the dimly white tarpaulin beds of the camp, and enveloping him the chill dampness of the wide night.

He listened attentively to make sure that he and Chet had not been left. No; snores were numerous enough to prove that the camp was intact. The picketed horses sighed and stamped. Then, as his eyes roved around, straining to pierce further the dusk, they rested upon Cherry's little tent (obscurely showing twenty yards away) just in time to distinguish the flap momentarily fade, so to speak, and a figure emerge—the figure, by size and quickness, of Cherry herself!

Phil cowered back in his covers, so that only his head was out, as customary. He curiously watched, and almost he giggled, at the thought that Cherry was walking in her sleep.

An instant she halted, and stood; then she turned aside, and gathering her saddle equipment carried it toward the horses. Depositing it (she moved with little sound, but with exceeding haste) she proceeded on, and came back leading a horse—presumably her own.

Phil began to be alarmed. Also, he was puzzled. She acted as if she was *awake*. Now she was saddling up, feverishly, again in much haste. Phil raised his head. 'Twas time that he intercepted.

"Hello," he said, softly, across the dusky space.

She made no response, nor appeared to hear. But

something in her nervous celerity made him think that she did hear.

"Hello," he repeated, in undertone; "where you going?"

"Uh! uh!" she murmured, shortly—which expressed "Shoo, fly!" "Be quiet!" and "None of your business," all in one. There rarely was any mistake as to what Cherry meant, when she spoke.

Now thoroughly in earnest, Phil sat up. Even as he did so Cherry led her horse away, by the bridle. Phil threw aside his covers and hauling his boots from beneath his bed tugged to get them on. He wriggled into his coat and scrambled to his feet, at the same time.

"Whoo-ee," he called, mildly, staggering stiffly through the brush, after her.

But with another low, warning "Uh! uh!"—this one being less a remonstrance than a caution—on the outskirts of the camp she had mounted, had ridden off, had merged, horse and self, with the mist and faintly illumined night; and was gone. Where?

In earnest Phil turned for his own saddle, found Medicine Eye, clapped bridle and saddle on him, working hard in the dimness with awkward fingers to accomplish the job before the girl was out of reach or he was interrupted. He would have wakened Chet, but he had no time. However, some of the camp was now aroused, for a voice spoke:

"Who is that, over there?"

"What's the matter, Dick?" Another voice.

"Somebody's saddlin' a hawss. Time to get up?"

"I dunno. Who is it?"

"Cook ain't called, has he?" A third voice.

"Who is that over there?"

"Macowan," replied Phil, swinging hurriedly into the saddle. "Cherry went somewhere—I'll see," he called back.

"Who?" demanded the sleepy questioner again, in tone irritated.

Phil paused not to repeat. But breaking Medicine Eye at once into a trot he sallied forth, upon the trail.

Behind him the camp began to chatter and stir, one after another of its members joining the confused discussion that he evidently had excited. Thus might exchange remarks a small colony of prairie-dogs, routed out of their holes; and as he left it behind Phil was moved to chuckle.

The open country, partially lighted by the gibbous moon, lay ghostly around him. Before, he could barely make out the combination figure of Cherry and her horse, crossing the flat. Medicine Eye pricked his ears, and whinnied. Of his own accord he quickened his trot. Occasionally he stumbled upon the brush hedging his course. No sound was to be heard, except the hoof-beats and the crackle of the branches. The moist sage gave forth a pleasantly pungent aroma, diffused from below and hanging in the damp, sluggish air. A slight mist, as of an exhalation from the heavy dew, hovered o'er. Phil's nostrils expanded, and he drank deep of the soothing atmosphere. He was thoroughly enjoying the adventure.

Cherry was climbing the mesa beyond which had

been discovered the sheep; and now his trot was rapidly bringing him nearer to her. Still at the trot, with sundry eager grunts Medicine Eye forced the ascent.

Cherry was pushing right on, as far ahead as ever. She was at a lope; and Medicine Eye, giving a little whimper as of disgust, also forged into a lope.

"Whoo-ee!" signaled Phil; but Cherry slackened not nor waited.

However, at the other edge of the mesa she pulled short, for a moment, as if peering into the swale below. Phil could distinguish her, in a spectral manner, doing this. It seemed as if she were listening, as well as peering. Then resuming her excursion she rode along the mesa edge. This enabled her pursuer, by changing Medicine Eye's course, to oblique in a short cut and converge upon her.

"What's the matter? Where you going?" Phil asked, about to reach her side.

"I can't find the sheep," she said. "Where do you suppose their camp is?"

Phil stared anxiously upon her, debating whether she was asleep or really awake.

"Oh, they're safe some place," he said, to humor her. "Come on; let's go back to camp."

"They are not safe," she retorted, so sharply as to convince him that she was indeed awake. "Everybody's coming over to kill them, and you know it."

The sight of her face and her widely-open indignant eyes, as she turned upon him, further convinced him as to her sanity.

"We can't help it. And I don't see why you want to start out and ride alone this way, in the middle of the night. You've no business to. It's dangerous."

"I can help it. I think it's a shame. You go back, but I'm going to find the sheep people and tell them."

"They know it. Buster told them what would happen. What can *you* do?"

"I can tell them again, and that it's really so, and that the men are coming right away and they'd better get ready to promise to take their sheep out."

"But they wouldn't promise, just a little while ago. Come on back. You can't do anything."

"They've had water now, maybe. They wouldn't promise before because they hadn't had water. And I don't believe they knew what a lot of men would get after them. I told on them and got them into trouble, too. If it hadn't been for me maybe they'd have gone through without being caught."

"Of course they'd have been caught." Phil spoke as confidently as he could. "Come on back, now. You've *got* to come back." He did not mean to be over-authoritative, but this assuredly was no escapade for a girl. He was alarmed.

"No, sir." Cherry was away again. "Go back, yourself. I don't ask you to stay, and I didn't ask your advice."

Phil followed. Of course, he could not go back and leave her. That was no part to play. He could not carry her back, either. So he must see her through.

"They couldn't have gone *very* far," soliloquized

Cherry. "We'll turn down here, Sukie (Sukie was her horse) and look for them."

She and Sukie plunged down the loose slope, in diagonal descent. Phil and Medicine Eye promptly did the same. There was no sound, save the passage of the horses. The swale all was quiet, as if devoid of life.

"You must be nearly opposite the water-hole," volunteered Phil, from behind. "That's where the camp would be."

"Oh, dear; we must hurry, Sukie," she sighed. "We'll be too late. I can hear the men coming."

Phil listened. He could hear nothing. But just then, close ahead amidst the denser mist that shrouded the swale into which they were entering, a dog barked.

"There they are!" exclaimed Cherry, joyously. "Hurry, Sukie." And at a gallop she dashed recklessly on.

The dog barked furiously. There was a querulous baa, followed by another and another. The chorus swelled. The riders seemed right upon a flock, unseen in the mist and brush. Phil frantically hammered Medicine Eye, to gain Cherry's side and thence to take the lead.

"Don't anybody shoot us," Cherry was calling, shrilly. "We want to tell you something."

Phil's ear caught a metallic click.

"Stop where you are, then. And tell it mighty quick," ordered a gruff voice, from the brush, close in front.

"We've stopped," informed Cherry.

"Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm just a girl."

"Who's with you?"

"Just a boy."

Phil was far from flattered, but this was no time nor place to argue upon his status of real cow-puncher.

"We've come from the cow-camp," he explained.

"What do you want?"

"It's to tell you that the whole camp is riding over to kill your sheep," narrated Cherry.

"We know that. Yuh can ride back again. Better do it 'fore yuh get hurt, too."

"But they are. There's such a lot of them. They are. They're coming now," protested Cherry, poignantly.

"What's it to *you*? You're a part of the camp, aren't yuh?"

"We don't want the sheep killed. I don't, anyway. Please promise to take them out, won't you? Please, please do. And hurry. The men'll be here in a minute," pleaded Cherry.

The figure of a man, rifle in hand, arose out of the brush, and approached them. This was a relief. To talk to a mere voice was unsatisfactory.

"It's only us," reassured Cherry. "I'm the girl who was over yesterday. But the whole camp's coming, just the same. Aren't they?" she appealed, to Phil.

"They shore are," corroborated Phil, with his broadest cow-range accent—intended to counteract that recent "boy" imputation of hers.

"How many?"

"Fifteen or twenty."

"Hear them?" added Cherry.

Distant could be distinguished a slight jingle, as of horses accoutered and ridden.

The sheepman—he was the tall, small-headed individual who had been so obstinate at the interview with Old Jess and squad—appeared to hesitate.

"There'll be guns a-poppin'," he said. "If those men want fight, they'll get it," and he cursed the near-ing raiders bitterly.

"But you'll lose your sheep. Truly, you will," pleaded Cherry. "While you're fighting some of them Buster and the rest will ride through and kill everything. They'll kill you, too, if you shoot back, I know they will. Please tell them you'll take the sheep out right away in the morning. I'll go and tell them to wait. Shall I?" she proffered, eagerly.

"I don't care for myself or the herders, but I do care for the sheep," mused the foreman. "I hate to be bluffed, too. Still—we've had water. I wouldn't have backed down last evenin' for *no* gang. I was bound to get water. Now—well, supposin' you ride back an' meet 'em, an' tell 'em I'm willin' to talk a bit. I hate to have the *sheep* killed. There's no sense in *that*."

As thus he argued, in helpless, hesitant fashion, half to them and half to himself, Phil felt a tinge of compassion. A second figure had emerged, shadowy, from the brush and the mist and stood silently near, listening.

"All right. We will," answered Cherry, in tone glad; and wheeled her horse.

"But tell 'em if they want fight jus' for the sake o' fightin' they can get it. We're armed an' we can shoot," called the foreman, after them, defiantly.

"They wouldn't care for *that*," scoffed Cherry, stanch to the camp, although appearing to betray it. "They're not afraid!"

Phil doubted the entire force of the foreman's declaration. He had noted that the second figure displayed no weapon.

With Cherry he rode back. They were guided by that jingle, now much plainer and mingled with the scrape of leather and the crackle of hoofs among the sage. Abruptly out of the dimness loomed obscure the bunch of horsemen descending along the swale; Cherry spurred to meet and intercept them.

"Wait!" she cried. "Wait!"

"Not by a jugful!" muttered Old Jess, from the front rank. "Get out o' the way. We'll wait later."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" demanded Mr. Simms. "Here—you and Phil and Chet and the hawss wrangler go back to camp. You aren't wanted, any of yuh."

"No, *no*!" protested Cherry. "Wait. You must wait." She weaved Sukie back and forth before them, as if to hold them. "He'll take his sheep out. He said so. He sent us to tell you."

"He will, will he?"

"He'll take 'em out by the tails, then."

"We'll tend to all that for him."

"Mutton for all. Come on, boys."

A medley of angry remarks was delivered. And Chet took occasion to reproach, of Phil:

"Aw, what'd you go off and leave me for?"

"But he said he would, first thing in the morning. He did—and he meant it, too; didn't he, Phil?" pursued Cherry, desperately. "He doesn't want his sheep killed. He's ready to talk with you. They've had water, now. He only wanted water for them. Please wait."

She was almost crying.

"That's the truth," corroborated Phil.

"Who told you two to butt in?" attacked a voice.

But Old Jess asked, crossly:

"Where is he, then, with his talk?"

"Back in the sage. I'll take you to him," answered Phil.

"I reckon we can find him without you, if we have to."

"Say, are yu goin' to talk with that skunk?" The demand was in Buster's curt, indignant tones.

"Mebbe we'd better. Shall we, George?"

"I'm with you," responded Mr. Simms.

A sullen murmur ran now here, now there, through the group.

"But what about us?" demanded Dick.

"You stay where you are. We'll be back in a minute." And the two rode on.

"Yes; 'wait,' jes' like the girl told us to," commented somebody, sarcastically.

This raised a laugh—but slight and of short dura-

tion. The horsemen shifted irksomely in their saddles.

"Listen to the woollies baa, will yuh!"

"Faugh!"

"What's the use in talkin'? He's had his chance."

"There's only one way to talk. That's with a thirty-thirty."

"Or a forty-five."

"Come on, boys. Shall we pile 'em, anyway? That's what we're here for." 'Twas the belligerent Pete who spoke.

"Pete wants his mutton."

"Shore I do," agreed Pete. "An' I want some fun, too. Ain't been in a sheep pile-up for two years."

"Mutton'd taste powerful good," sighed Haney. "Grub pi-ile."

"Sheep pi-ile, yuh mean," corrected Dick.

"What'd you go off and leave me for?" reproached Chet, again, of Phil.

"I couldn't help it," defended Phil.

"Was ridin' with his girl," sneered Bud the wrangler.

"Shut up, you hawss jingler," silenced Chet, tartly.

"There they come," announced somebody.

The group awaited the report of Old Jess and Mr. Simms, who could be descried returning.

"Well, it's all right, boys," said the veteran cattleman. "He back-tracks with his woollies, first thing in the morning."

"He does, does he?" replied Buster, boldly. "I

don't savvy that 'all right' business. We're goin' to let him, are we?"

"I reckon we are."

"I reckon we *aren't*. What'd we take this ride for—our healths?"

"No, for his, looks like," commented somebody, slyly.

"For Buster's, too; thought he was kind o' pale and peaked. Can't eat," supplemented somebody else.

"To pile up the sheep means a fight, boys, and some one'll get hurt," explained Old Jess, farther. "He means business—an' if he'll take his sheep out peaceable we'd better let him. Any one of us is worth more'n his whole outfit, an' in the mix-up he's jes' as likely to pot us as we are to pot him. We'll send a man or two along with him in the mornin', to see that he keeps the trail an' don't stop."

"Don't yuh try to send me," growled Buster. "I ain't got down to breathin' sheep-dust yet."

"He still claims he came in by mistake. That those two fellers told him this was reserve and they'd pass him through," was saying Mr. Simms. "Better give him the benefit o' the doubt. Of course, he was blamed spunky yesterday afternoon. But *now* he's going to take his sheep *out*. And that's what we want. If it was the owners of the sheep with 'em I'd be for teaching a lesson—but he's only boss and perhaps he wouldn't get a square deal from them after it was all over."

"Huh!" growled Buster, still unmollified.

The party faltered and fidgeted. The ardor was

cooling. The veteran cattleman decided for the waverers.

"Well," he quoth. "'Most time for the cavvy to come in. Let's go to camp, boys."

"An' don't we get a mutton, even?" queried Pete, aggrievedly, as the party turned.

"Out on the roundup, boys, I tell yuh what yuh get—
Little chunk o' bread an' a little chunk o' meat;
Little black coffee, boys, chuck full o' alkali——"

chanted Haney, softly.

"Yuh can ride over early in the mornin' and dicker with him, Pete!" proposed Old Jess, grimly.

"Not on yore life!" repudiated Pete, in scorn. "Any sheepman who dickers with me'll have to come to my fire. I ain't *buyin'* my mutton, either. Not in cattle country."

The party rode on in silence. Cherry sighed.

"Oh, I'm so glad."

"Mus' be yu don't like mutton," accused Buster, disgustedly. "What'd yu come interferin' for—spoilin' our picnic?"

"I'd got those sheep people in trouble by telling on them, so I tried to get them out," elucidated Cherry, promptly.

"Well, yu shore are a trouble maker," grumbled Buster.

"She thought she was doing right," supported Mr. Simms.

The men had begun to talk more freely, with re-

marks varied. Loudest of all in his assertions and complainings was Bud the wrangler; and presently he came sidling between Chet and Phil.

"What do you say," he communicated, confidentially. "You two an' me an' Pete an' Buster 'll sneak back an' get a mutton. I bet we could do it. Then we'll pile up some sheep an' skip."

"Aw, pish! Yuh make me sick," rebuked Chet.

Bud faded.

"What'd you go off and leave me for?" reiterated Chet, to Phil.

"But I couldn't help it. Honest, I couldn't," protested Phil. "You see—Cherry started out and I followed."

He stopped short. He didn't wish to appear to blame her—she being a girl.

"But what'd you two go and interfere for, anyway?" scolded Chet. "We'd give (sometimes Chet waxed ungrammatical) him his chance and he wouldn't take it. He'd *ought* to have his sheep piled up."

"But Phil didn't interfere," interposed Cherry, quickly. "He didn't know anything about it until he caught me, and then he tried to make me come back. But I wouldn't."

This exoneration spread; for in due time Phil found himself reinstated to his former standing as a member of the camp. And even the resentment against Mistress Cherry speedily paled. Not that she cared, apparently, whether or no; for a more independ-

ent creature never breathed. The quality was one that the men could not help but admire.

“Grub pi-ile,” murmured Haney, that night—or that morning—as he again crawled into bed. “An’ nothin’ but beef. Pity the pore cowboy.”

CHAPTER XXVII

PEPPER SEEKS THE WILD BUNCH

"THIS ain't a roundup. This is a shoveup," declared Old Jess, scornfully, as they rode along.

"Why?" invited Phil.

"Why!" grunted Old Jess. "Because it is. It's a shoveup from the winter range to the summer range. O' course we make a point to brand the calves an' cut out the herds, but it's no reg'lar roundup like in the plains country. On the plains we set out in April, soon as the grass was green, an' rode our circles 'till we'd gathered all the critters in the district at the rodero ground—know what that is?"

"No, unless it comes from 'rodeo,'" confessed Phil.

He was enjoying Old Jess, who was in one of his rare talkative reminiscent moods.

"It does, I reckon. 'Rodear' is Spanish for round-in'-up, and 'rodero' mus' be the roundup itself. Anyhow, that's how we use it, pronounced on the second syl'ble. And after all the critters been gathered each outfit cut out its own animals an' tuk 'em away to the home range. Cattle on the plains'd drift a hundred miles durin' the winter, and the roundup district might cover a hundred and fifty miles. No, this ain't a roundup. There ain't roundups any more.

I've seen forty wagons an' two hundred men together. Yes, sir; forty fires agoin'. That was a picnic for the cowboys. We started when there was grazin' for the hawsses, and we were gone 'till the summer, sleepin' on the ground an' livin' off the chuck-wagon, an' renewin' acquaintance with other cowboys."

Phil reflected.

"But those days are gone—and the long-horn breed o' punchers and o' cattle is gone, too. I'm one o' the last men who rode the Texas Trail, I reckon; and that banded steer in the wild bunch of the Little Squaw country is the only long-horn animal I've seen in ten year—and he's a throw-back."

"Where are the long-horned cattle, like those in pictures?" asked Phil.

"Quit. Played out. The cattleman to-day wants beef, not horn. He can get it, because cattle aren't trailed any more from Texas clean up into Kansas and Montana, like they once were when we needed the little ol' Texas dogie with his four-foot spread o' horn, who could travel his three mile an hour, and the Texas boys to drive him. He was good enough for the Injun an' the soldier. O' course, up here everything is a short-horn, anyway. Cows taken into the mountains an' the timber breed to shorter horns, as a rule. That banded steer is part of a Texas herd. His mother was from Texas. But he's gone back o' her several generations. Does my eyes good whenever I see him. Do you know how to tell the age of a cow?"

"No."

"By the horns. A yearlin's horns are rough. When she's two-year-old her horns are smoother an' the roughness gets to be a button on the tip. Horns of a three-year-old have lost that button and are sharp. Some folks claim the horns hold a wrinkle for every year. And you'll have to remember that a yearlin's a yearlin' till she's two years old, and a two-year-old till she's three. Three-year-old's tail begins to almost touch the ground. Long tail, old cow. Down in Texas they used to put a figger on the calf when they branded it, to show the year. Once in a while now you'll come across an animal branded that way, with the range brand and a number—a six, or eight, or two, as happens, to tell the year it was born. O' course the only sure way, when you're partic'lar, is to throw the critter and examine its mouth. But an experienced cowman usu'ly can look at a cow from the saddle an' guess mighty close."

The roundup was nearing completion. One by one the various outfits whose range lay adjoining had taken their herds and left. The Reverse R had dropped out; the Flying U, the Triangle Cross, the Open A, the Boot and the Three I (last to join); all had eventually diverged, at the proper places, and gone upon their own trail, seeking their own recognized summer pastures. Only the Lazy J remained, keeping its herd separate but traveling on in company with the Bar B.

Larger even than the Lazy J's was the Bar B herd; so large, in fact, that two herds had been made of it—one of the steers, and one of the cows or she-stock.

And thus, in three columns, the twain outfits steadily advanced, into the higher country, making for the summer range.

Phil, riding with the cavalry behind the she-stock herd, had become thoroughly hardened. There was nothing of the convalescent about *him*. Not only was the pneumonia a thing of the remote past, but all his saddle-welts and blisters and stirrup-sores had succumbed completely or had been changed to harmless callouses. He sat his saddle with never a thought of himself; no more did he clutch the horn when careering through the brush; he was perfectly competent to catch his horse out of the herd—but he did not yet pretend to roping from horseback. As a plain roper, afoot, he was passable. But he could ride, and ride, and ride, with the toughest.

The day was hot. However, the program of late had been straight driving, with only occasional side excursions to gather in a few strays, all, with few exceptions, Bar B or Lazy J; for the cattle were still on the lower levels, whither winter had held them or the spring and quest of water had impelled them.

"There's a critter or two," abruptly indicated Old Jess, who after his brief dissertation upon roundups, long-horns, and connected matters, had lapsed into silence. "Bring 'em in, you two boys."

On the Bar B side, across the rolling sandy flat which they were traversing, could be noted several cattle grazing. For them the boys headed, racing along at a free gallop; and parted, to close in behind them from opposite directions.

Chet had the easier time of it; the two animals on his flank allowed themselves to be circumvented readily, and in docile manner they trotted before him, in the direction of the herds. But the third animal, a roan mammy cow, thin and long-legged, veered from Phil's onrush, and breaking back repeatedly kept him and Pepper busy. Chet laughed with derisive glee.

"She's got a calf back in the timber somewhere, I bet," he called. "Let her go and come along."

Phil and Pepper were not disposed to let her go. It was a game, with the roan cow dodging and turning, and boy and horse constantly intercepting her. On the edge of a shallow arroyo, at the base of the cedared slope which came down to meet the flat, Pepper slipped in the treacherous gravelly sand, and slid upon his side. Phil instinctively threw himself clear (he was mindful of his legs, not to get *them* caught) and he too went plunging and plowing. The bridle lines were torn from his hand.

Pepper regained feet first; when Phil scrambled to his, Pepper was standing, gazing in alert, suspicious way all about, and the roan cow was trotting off through the cedars.

Pepper snorted, loudly. For some inexplicable reason he seemed on the verge of a panic. He held his head high, and his ears were pricked, and he continued to stare and with long-drawn breaths to sniff the atmosphere. Phil approached him very cautiously.

"Here, Pepper. Whoa-oa, now. What's the matter with yuh? Steady!"

Certainly there was nothing in a mere falling down to make a horse act so.

Pepper started to walk, irresolutely. This was alarming to Phil, for no well-bred cow-horse is supposed to move when his lines are on the ground.

"Whoa ! What's the matter with yuh, you fool !" Phil, cow-boy, spoke to Pepper, cow-horse.

Pepper hesitated. Authority hailed him—but something else, unfathomed by Phil, also was hailing. Again Pepper snorted; and then, with a succession of snorts, head high, ears pricked, lines dangling about his forefeet, away he went, at a trot, faster, faster, climbing into the cedars.

Vainly Phil ran clumsily after, and panted, angrily:

"Hey ! Whoa !" Pepper paid no attention; the cedars swallowed him; from among them he whinnied shrilly—but it was not for his master. He continued to whinny, at intervals, until his silly falsetto died in the distance.

Phil halted, breathless, stunned. Pepper, of all horses, to serve him such a trick ! And now what was he, himself, to do—thus left afoot, in chaps and high-heeled boots, and in a country where walking was neither the fashion nor locomotion easy.

The chase after the roan cow (confound her !) had taken him into a little draw leading off from the flat. He was out of sight of the herds; he was out of sight of Chet. Nobody knew his predicament. And what ought he to do ? Chase after Pepper ? No ; inasmuch as Pepper had disappeared among the timber the proper thing to do, now, in the crisis, was,

it seemed, get another horse. Anyway, get in touch with help: man *or* horse. So he shuffled quickly to the juncture of draw and flat and looked for Chet.

His heart sank. Chet was continuing on, across the flat, driving the two cows. Far distant were the herds themselves, also continuing, and going almost directly away from him. If Chet did not look back and espy him thus afoot, small was the chance that he would be espied by anybody. He groaned at the prospect of having to catch up, by hook or crook, afoot.

Shucks ! But he started on, making what speed he could, accoutered as he was, amidst the brush, under the burning sun. He whooped his loudest, to attract attention ; putting his hands either side of his mouth and using lungs and throat to the limit. Then he toiled on again, stumbling and perspiring.

Chet, riding methodically, drew farther and farther away. The driven herds formed a confused mass, marked chiefly by the dust which they were raising. Very small felt Phil, trudging ignominiously after, essaying to cover distance with his puny steps ; very small, and somewhat vexed and somewhat abashed. However, he was certain that he had not lost Pepper through fault of his own. He ought not to have let go of the lines, but they had been wrenched from him. Moreover, Pepper was to blame ; Pepper should not have refused to stand. He had acted unaccountably.

Phil had no fear that he would not rejoin the roundup camp. He had only to keep going until he

struck the trail made by the drive, and then to follow persistently. The chances were that when he did not turn up somebody would be sent back to look for him. But he did not fancy this walking when he had been accustomed to riding. No cowboy likes to walk ! And he was a cowboy.

However, while he was plugging ahead, wrathfully cogitating as he zigzagged through the constantly impeding sage and greasewood, his heart suddenly lightened hopefully. Chet had halted, and had turned in the saddle to gaze behind him.

Frantically yelled Phil, and waved his hat, wishing that he were twenty feet tall or could send up a rocket. But presently Chet's keen eyes must have seen, anyway, for back he came, at a trot.

Once assured that Chet had actually sighted him, Phil sat down, more content, and rested. When Chet was near, and peering right and left, he stood again.

"What's the matter ? Where's your horse ?" demanded Chet.

"He ran away."

"Throw you off ?"

"Not exactly. No. He fell down with me, and then he wouldn't let me catch him."

"Where'd he go ?"

"Up through the cedars, there."

"You went at him too brash, I bet. Ought to've gone up to him slow and easy, talking to him; then he'd have let you catch him," decreed Chet, wisely.

"That's what I did," defended Phil. "But he didn't give me much chance. He stood for just a

moment, then he started into the cedars whinnying, and that's the last I heard or saw of him. How'll I get to camp? I can't *walk*," he added, in regulation cow-puncher disgust.

"Maybe this hawss'll carry double. Get up and see," invited Chet. "If he don't throw you off I'll take you in. Or you can stay here and I'll come back for you with a horse out of the cavvy."

"Don't know whether Camel Face'll carry double, or not," he continued, as Phil carefully mounted, and sat behind with his grasp upon the cantle. "Look out, now. Don't you go pulling *me* off, too, when you tumble."

But Camel Face proceeded peaceably. At walk and at trot (the latter jouncing Phil, insecure behind the saddle, most maliciously, as seemed to him) they picked their way through the brush. Chet insisted upon driving the two cows. And thus, bringing the two animals and only the one horse they at last overtook the drive.

To the cautious, but interested queries upon his plight, Phil, red-faced with the jolting and with the vexation, earnestly related his experience.

"Didn't yuh keep hold the lines?" asked Old Jess.

"It was all soft, and when I threw myself clear I went sliding and they were jerked out of my hands."

"He wouldn't stand for you to ketch him, eh?"

"No; and of course I didn't have my rope."

"We're up in the wild-horse country. That's what the matter is," asserted Mr. Simms, who had come over from the cow-herd.

"Yes; he smell 'em. Now he go find 'em," concurred Hombre.

"He took my saddle and bridle and rope and everything. I want those," declared Phil.

"And I want that hawss. He's worth sixty dollars. One o' the best hawsses in the herd," announced Mr. Simms, emphatically. "By ginger, I wouldn't take sixty dollars for him."

"Won't he ever come back?" exclaimed Cherry. "Phil can have one of my horses."

"Perhaps he'll find the herd and come back with that," volunteered Phil.

"No, he follow up those wil' hoss," affirmed Hombre. "Like wil' hoss better than tame hoss."

"We'll have to night-hawk that herd, for a while," said Mr. Simms, "or we'll lose every hawss in the bunch."

"I suppose the boy an' Chet had better set right out on his trail, an' not quit 'till they find him," grunted Old Jess. "Sooner he's found the better, too. If he's gone long he won't be wuth the cat'ridge to shoot him with for sake o' the saddle."

"No; he get to like it, then he always run," agreed Hombre.

"That's so," nodded Buster. "Might as well shoot him."

"Shall we shoot him, dad, if we have to?" inquired Chet.

"Give him a good long try, first. You'll get him, if you can see him once. Keep after him. He may tangle up in the bridle lines, or the saddle'll slip

around under his belly and hold him. Anyway, don't shoot unless it's the last thing left."

"They may never sight him at all," said Buster. "He's a Green River hawss, ain't he? Like as not he'll work back to the home range. That's the way they do."

"No; he follow wil' hoss," insisted Hombre. "Lots of wil' hoss through here."

"When the cavy comes in this evening Phil can take another hawss, and you two boys go over to the wild-hawss camp at Mustang Hole and mebbe they'll make a surround with you and you'll get him," directed Mr. Simms.

"All right," exclaimed Chet, with alacrity.

"I hope we do get him," proffered Phil, as they rode on double.

And he meant it. Pepper was his favorite. Gray Jack came next. Medicine Eye was a pretty good horse, when one was careful not to interfere with his back cinch region. So was Red Bird. Even Bow-legs was a mount to be fond of; he was big and strong and went crashing through the stoutest sage, never attempting to jump or dodge. But Pepper, active, alert, wiry, always willing, was the best.

At the camp, while dinner was preparing and before the cavy had been driven in, Pete (as to be expected) discoursed to the assembly upon *his* experiences.

"When I was ridin' for the Box C we lost a hawss jes' this way—got loose an' the man couldn't ketch him, an' he ran off to join the wild hawsses. The

man follered that hawss for a month, an' when he got him the saddle blankets had growed right into the flesh so hide an' all come off with 'em. Had to kill the hawss. Mouth was all sore from the bit, too."

Phil hoped that this would not be Pepper's condition. It seemed rather an uncertain hunt, this—seeking a stray horse in such a boundless expanse of country, hilly and timbered. A needle in a hay-stack was about as practicable.

Pete was continuing.

"An' saddled an' bridled like he was he'd run the wild hawsses plumb out the country; further they got, further *he* got."

This assertion did not simplify the situation any.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WILD-HORSE CAMP

"ARE they regular wild horses?" asked Phil, as he and Chet rode out through the twilight, across the park wherein the roundup camp (what was left of it) had been located for the night.

"Some are. Of course the old ones were tame horses that got away from ranchers or roundups or cowboys, but there are a lot of mavericks, too, born wild. The State claims these as strays, but the wild-horse men can buy 'em for five dollars. The branded stock is claimed by the owners and the wild-horse men get something for them. There isn't much money in wild-hawss catching, tho', and it's awful hard work, too."

"Where is the wild-horse camp?"

"Over in Mustang Basin. I know where. About ten miles from here. We can make it in two hours."

They trotted along, Chet upon Thunder, Phil upon Gray Jack.

"You want to take your top hawss," had instructed Chet. "You need a good hawss, to run other hawsses."

Now that Pepper had absconded with saddle and bridle Gray Jack was left the sole "top hawss" in Phil's string. Formerly they had shared the honors

—with Pepper perhaps a little in the lead. But mounting Gray Jack this evening, Phil had mentally apologized to him for ever having rated him as second. *He* surely would not be such an ingrate as to desert, basely, carrying with him valuable property and disregarding the plight of his master.

Phil felt rather sore about Pepper. Were it not for that extra saddle and bridle which he had used before falling heir to the equipment of the man with the frozen smile, he would indeed be in a fix. He might have borrowed Pete's outfit—but Pete was liable to want it again any time; he was so erratic. Moreover, Pepper did not know that there was the extra saddle. He would have put his master afoot.

Besides, a fellow liked to be using his own.

Mr. Simms had mildly suggested that Chet have the rifle, as being more accustomed to one; and as being less apt to shoot unnecessarily. Phil had meekly turned the little gun and scabbard over, and they now were under Chet's left leg.

"But I don't want *that hawss shot*, remember," had instructed the cattleman, sternly. "You try him to the limit, without. Scout around through that Mustang country, and when you sight him work up to him easy, and like as not you won't even have to put a rope on him. Those wild-hawss men will help you. You can stay at their camp."

Chet had listened gravely. He had the mien of one who could be depended upon. Phil resigned the rifle to him willingly enough, for upon him were resting the responsibilities of the expedition.

As they rode, the twilight changed from golden to pink. A soft refulgence, which threw no high-lights nor shadows, flooded the cedars. The world was growing quiet; a few birds twittered as they flitted here and there within easy access of their favorite roosting places; several times rabbits went hopping through among the low trees, or amidst the bushes. The mountain-range to the south, displayed in all its ruggedness as the boys followed along a ridge, stood out gloriously rose and purple, with one snowy peak, the highest, just tipped by sunshine.

In the valleys and over the mountains the purple gained upon the rose; the white of the dazzling tip swiftly dulled; it vanished; almost imperceptibly, yet surely, that soft refulgence among the cedars merged with chill somberness; and through the dusk, with the west still bright, but with the stars marching up out of the east, the boys rode into the wild-horse camp.

This was a dingy tent pitched beside a small spring at the foot of a short timbered slope, and inhabited by two men and a shaggy, aggressive black dog. The dog barked. One of the men, with smooth thin face, high cheek-bones and slanting eyes, stood in the door of the tent and watched the approach of the visitors. The other man, burly and full-bearded, was squatting without, pipe in mouth, washing dishes.

"Hello," said Chet, halting Thunder.

Phil nodded.

"How," said the man in the tent door. The other man, like Phil, also nodded.

The two boys dismounted.

"Running any hawsses, these days ?" asked Chet, casually.

The man who was squatting over the dishes looked up keenly.

"Some," responded the other man. "You're from the Bar B, aren't you ?"

"Yes."

"George Simms' boy, eh ?"

Chet, too, nodded.

"We lost a hawss," he informed. "Went off, saddle, bridle and all."

"When was that ?"

"This afternoon."

"You ridin' him ?"

"No; he was from the Bar B herd, but this friend of mine was riding him."

Both men eyed Phil as if estimating him. But Phil had grown used to this Western trait of silent, non-committal scrutiny, and took it coolly.

"Throw you off ?" addressed the squatting man, removing his pipe.

"I threw myself off," explained Phil. "He slipped and fell under me, and jerked the lines out of my hands."

"Couldn't ketch him, eh ?"

"No."

"He went at a trot through the cedars whinnying as if he'd smelled some wild hawsses," supplemented Chet.

"There's quite a few of 'em about." The man in

the tent door spoke laconically. "What hawss was it?"

"A little speckled blue, with a diamond on his right hip and the Circle Dot brand on his right shoulder."

"You know Buster thought that he might work back to Green River, where he came from." reminded Phil.

"No; not if he's following any wild hawsses," stated the squatting man, decisively. "Think so, Fred?"

"Never in the world, till the wil' hawsses shake him. But they won't have much to do with him long as he has that saddle an' bridle on him."

"I want that saddle and bridle," declared Phil. "They're worth as much as the horse."

"Can't be a very good horse, then," rebuked the man in the doorway, whose name was Fred. "You may have to shoot him to get 'em. He's likely to use 'em pretty hard, too."

"We want the hawss, too," said Chet, decidedly. "If you're going to make a surround pretty soon we'll stay and help, and see if we can't get him."

"Sure," said the man Fred. "You're just in time. There's a bunch that's been comin' in to water, an' if they come to-night we'll make a surround in the mornin'. Only got our corral fixed to-day."

"Yes," concurred the squatting man, who now, having done the dishes, straightened. He relighted his pipe. "If you do get him it'll save you a lot o' work. This is a bad country to find hawsses in. You might hunt him six months and never even sight him

—'specially if he's on the trail of a wild bunch and they're scared of him. Turn your hawsses into the little corral with ours. Had supper?"

"Now, boys, it's this way," elucidated the bearded man, as they all lay upon the bedding inside the lantern-lighted tent. "I'll tell you in case you don't know. We won't have time to talk in the morning. The hawsses come in to water at a certain time, three or four o'clock, and by a certain way. They're using a water-hole across the basin, and we've built a brush corral down below it. They come in at the upper end. We get there just before daylight, and run 'em down into the corral. Then if your hawss is there you can rope him out. Savvy?"

The boys "savvied."

"How's your friend, on the ride? Pretty good?" asked the other man.

"Yes; he can ride all right," assured Chet.

"He'll have to, or he'll get his neck broke," remarked the man. "May get it broke anyway." He yawned. "Well, let's turn in," he proposed. "Mornin' comes quick when you're goin' to run wi'l'-hawsses."

The bedding was spread. They removed boots and coats and trousers; and the tent flaps having been thrown open they all crawled in together, four in a row, under covers. The bearded man reached for the lantern and blew out its flame.

They lay quietly. The boys had been given the guest place in the middle—that being naturally the warmer place. From without the dog sneaked in,

to curl himself with a sigh behind the yet warm camp stove. A coyote barked. In the near-by corral a horse whinnied shrilly.

"There's wil' ones around somewheres, all right," commented Fred, sleepily.

The other man already was snoring. Presently Fred and Chet also were snoring. But Phil stayed awake for some time, the morrow's strenuous program racing through his mind. Outside the wind moaned dismally. The horses whinnied no more.

While wondering where Pepper was, fatuously roaming, saddled and bridled, through the timber and the open, and how he liked it, Phil fell asleep.

His bed-fellows stirring awakened him. The bearded man was just lighting the lantern. The man Fred was yawningly pulling on boots. Chet sleepily sat up.

"Tumble out, boys," bade the bearded man. "Be ketching your hawsses, and I'll warm some coffee. Then we'll start."

The boys donned what they had doffed, it seemed to Phil, only a minute before, and following Fred went stumbling out into the darkness. By this darkness and by the chill, morning might have yet been hours away. But their eyes speedily grew accustomed to the obscurity; and even by the time they had reached the corral they could see sufficiently for their errand.

In the small brush enclosure no ropes were required; bridled, the four mounts were led forth, and saddled.

The pitch smoke, tinging the dampish, murky at-

mosphere of just-before-dawn, smelled good. It told of warmth and coffee; and a pleasant sizzling told of bacon. The lantern shone through the tent walls.

"Here's coffee, whoever wants some," announced the bearded man, from the flaps, as the three were drawing on their chaps.

He did not mention bacon, but it was there; and sitting amidst the touseled bedding they all drank, hastily, and chewed.

The dog gobbled the few scraps.

"Right, oh," quoth the bearded man, rising. "This'll hold us till we get back."

"And we've got no time to lose, either," said the other, as the lantern was extinguished and they stepped out.

During the brief meal, the dimness had grayed perceptibly. Dawn certainly was at hand. The sky was paler, the stars not so numerous; a bird chirped, with drowsy, inquiring little voice. But he may have been dreaming.

"Had this camp long?" asked Phil, bluffly, as they mounted.

"Been here since January."

The answer was rather startling.

"Much snow?"

"'Bout four feet on the level."

In single file they rode out, the bearded man taking the lead, Phil bringing up the rear. He shivered, but the motion of the horse soon corrected that.

At a smart jog they proceeded, winding through the cedars, whose thick, crooked trunks and low branches

showed dimly in the gloom. Occasionally stumbling upon fallen branches in their path the horses kept the file, each seeming to step in the tracks of the one before. The bearded man, leading, never faltered. Evidently he knew exactly where he was going, and no word was spoken.

So it was jog, jog, jog, on eerie, mysterious quest amidst the silent, murky coppice, until, having traveled for perhaps half an hour, they halted.

"One man stay here," directed the leader. "You boy that lost the hawss will do. Now, the brush corral is off yonder, down the draw. A wing of it reaches up this way, and another wing is across opposite. When it's lighter you'll hear one of us whistle. Then you want to ride forward at a jump, making all the noise you can; don't you let a hawss get past you. Head 'em off if they try it. Ride your darnedest and break your neck if you have to, but keep moving. When we get them pointed on down we shove them right along into the corral."

A sudden coughing snort, in the gloom beyond, and a faint jangle, interrupted him. The horses, with a whoof, stared.

"Hear that?" exclaimed Fred. "There's your hawss, I bet a hat. It's some animal with a saddle on, all right."

Phil's heart gave a leap of hope.

"I'll start him down," said the bearded man; he rode on, and in a moment with another snort and a crash and jangle the unseen creature went blundering away.

"He's inside the line, now; we ought to get him," remarked the bearded man, looming through the dimness. "Come on, you other fellows."

They rode away, leaving Phil posted like a sentinel, or like a hunter in a duck-blind awaiting the morning flight. All sound of them died out, swallowed, along with themselves, by the gloom.

However, the gloom was fading; it was waning to a thin gray, through which the bushes and the tree-trunks showed plainer and plainer. Birds twittered and fluttered unseen. The dawn was at hand, and Phil harked nervously for the whistle signal. It came—a clear, but distant note, token for him to move into action. At the prick of the spur jammed against his side Gray Jack sprang forward; and with his ears pointed as if he, too, was alert, trotted ahead.

What was to happen, now?

Standing in his stirrups Phil peered anxiously before. The ground sloped away, and the direction which seemed natural for him to take bore diagonally adown. Down-hill riding—especially on the jump—was hard work. However, he was in for it.

A sudden series of shrill shouts came echoing across to him; they were taken up and repeated along the unseen line, and he joined in. They sounded as though something had been caught, already.

A rabbit ran affrightedly athwart his path, fleeing from the left. And more interesting, another animal, with sharp ears, sharp snout, and bushy tail held low behind yellowing, shaggy body came loping, so intent upon the other shouts that it saw him only just in

time and veered, changing to a streak, into some bushes. Loudly yelped Phil, to accelerate its rout. Gray Jack broke into a lope. Two bare and riderless horses next came galloping, heads up, mane and tail streaming. Almost they crossed in front, making up the slope, before they saw. They must be part of the wild bunch ! Gray Jack swerved of his own accord, and wheeling with a snort they dashed back down again.

“Ki yi !”

Exultantly yelled Phil; exultantly and plainer sounded the yells of his co-partners. Gray Jack loped faster. The cedars opened and through the scattered boles they recklessly tacked. Now and beyond, across upon an opposite slope another horseman was descried likewise riding hard. Down in the cup of the draw, which lay between, treeless and misty, loose horses were cantering wildly. From the center behind burst Chet and Fred at full speed, driving before them a second squad. One animal therein was saddled, the stirrups dangling wide. Hurrah, then ! 'Twas Pepper !

The race was on. To hold his flank even, Gray Jack fairly flew. No time was to be given the driven horses to break back. So down they tore, the riders all, converging, spurring, whooping. Phil steadied himself (willy-nilly) by the saddle-horn, and gripped his best with his thighs. It was his roughest ride yet. Now he knew what “running horses” in the timber meant. Now he realized why that allusion to a damaged neck ! But he could not stop, if he would ;

Gray Jack was sliding, plowing, plunging irresistibly onward, mad with the zest of pursuit. And he would not stop if he could, because he must keep up his end of the semicircle.

They all were upon the comparative level, clattering over the rocks, leaping bushes, careering headlong in the wake of the fleeing quarry. Suddenly the work had been accomplished. The whooping ceased and the pursuit pulled up, to watch as the driven herd, with recoil and snort, seeking right and left for exit, trotted along the low bristling barrier forming the front of the brush corral.

"Easy, boys. They'll go in when once they get started," cautioned the bearded man.

"There's Pepper!" called Chet, across.

"I see him," answered Phil.

"He's got his saddle twisted."

"Yes, and he's stepped on his bridle reins and snapped 'em short," informed Fred.

Suspiciously a horse entered through the opening which indicated the corral gate; another did the same, and another followed.

"That's a maverick," announced the bearded man. "There's that little stallion, too, Fred, we've been after so long."

Turned back as they tried right and left for other avenue the remainder of the horses entered—Pepper jostling in with the rest. Immediately when there was space enough he received from his nearest neighbor a resounding kick, which he accepted meekly, as a sign to keep away.

"Good enough for you," jeered Phil. "That's what you get for trying to be a wild horse."

"All right, boys," said the bearded man. He and Fred dismounted and closed the opening with brush which was lying ready.

"Pretty fair haul," he remarked, as all surveyed the captives who, trotting about the enclosure, nipping and laying back ears as if each blamed the others for their plight, found themselves entrapped.

There were nine, not including Pepper: seven adults and two colts.

"Two broke back and got away, up the hill," quoth Fred. "Couldn't stop 'em."

The sun of morning shone out, topping the cedars banked against the east and succeeding the milder glow of dawn.

"Want to take your hawss now, boys?" inquired Fred.

They thought that they might as well.

"Want to get that saddle straightened, anyhow," advised the bearded man. "Liable to hurt it or himself."

Pepper was roped and overhauled. His condition was not, one would imagine, very comfortable. The saddle had been thrust sidewise so that it hung with the horn sticking straight out from his ribs, one stirrup thumping the ribs opposite and the other stirrup banging against his fetlocks. The cinches were wearing the hide from his backbone. Both bridle reins had been snapped, and the bit had torn his lips slightly.

"Reckon if you'd take that bridle off he'd like to

eat. Can't chew well with the bit in his mouth," suggested Fred.

They relieved Pepper of his incumbrances and conducting him away picketed him near the camp. His coat was scratched, his mane and tail filled with twigs and dirt. In so short a time he had degenerated. And he seemed not particularly glad to be recovered.

The wild-horse men refused to take any pay for him or the services that they had rendered; in fact, they declared that the account was squared by the help which the two boys had given. And after breakfast, with a "So long," the visitors rode away, leading with them the recreant.

"Got him, did you?" congratulated Mr. Simms, with a grim smile, as about the middle of the morning they fell in again with the cow-herd, behind which were leisurely trailing the twain veterans: rancher and old-time puncher. "Any trouble?"

"No, sir; not much."

"Found him with the wild-hawss bunch?"

"Yes, sir; got him in a surround this morning."

Mr. Simms grunted; Old Jess grunted.

"Looks kinder seedy, don't he?" observed the latter.

The boys found the roundup finally dissolved down to the Bar B itself. During their absence—brief though that had been—the Lazy J had vanished; gone to its own range. Pete the cook had gone with it. So had Bud the wrangler. Haney and Hombre were driving the diminished horse-herd.

Phil felt a vain disappointment that he might not

have bid good-by to Henry and Dick, the captious, lanky Pete, and the rest; even to Bud the brazen. But Chet took the departure as a matter of course, and nobody else expressed any regrets; so he said nothing. Welcome to come and welcome to go, evidently was the sentiment in the cow country.

When Pepper had been thrown in with the horse-herd then it was that Mr. Simms produced an envelope and held it out to Phil.

"Here's a letter for you, I reckon," he said.

A letter from home !

"Who brought the mail ?" demanded Chet.

"Hombre rode in to town last night and brought it back with him this morning."

"They want me to come home," announced Phil, looking up from the page. "They think I'm getting too well." He laughed, ruefully. "I've told them so much about the riding and how tough I am that they say they think I'm well enough to quit !"

"Oh, thunder !" protested Chet. "We were just getting ready to have some fun !"

"Goin' ?" queried Old Jess, quietly.

"Yes. I suppose I ought to. I was out of school this spring and there's some work I can make up before September term."

"Then when do you want to start?" asked Mr. Simms.

"As soon as I can. I've had a lot of fun, anyway. I'd better go."

"You can come back again. We'll be here, if those rustlers don't drive us out—and I reckon they won't;

or sheep either. Did you leave any things at the ranch ? ”

“ A few.”

“ Then you and Chet might ride over there and get 'em. It's your best chance ; right from here. I'm going to send in a bunch o' beef in a day or so to the Junction, and you can go along with that and catch your train there.”

“ We'll bring up the rifles,” exclaimed Chet, alert. “ Maybe Phil and I can shoot a bear before he leaves.”

Cherry came galloping over from the steer herd ; but they could not delay, and with her lamentations over the sudden change in plans following them they rode away again, for the ranch.

CHAPTER XXIX

MORE RUSTLER SIGNS—AND BEARS

"THERE she is," announced Chet, in the advance; and now himself rounding the shoulder of the hill Phil saw, before and slightly below, the familiar Bar B ranch lying bathed in the full sun.

"Seems to be all there," he commented.

"She sure does," responded Chet.

They rode down, into the road, and through the lane entered among the buildings. The low, rude group, basking silent and lifeless, appealed to Phil as mutely reproachful at having been so long deserted. And yet really it had not been long; only a few weeks.

With the air of proprietorship, the boys dismounted, tied their horses to the rail and trod familiar ground.

"Somebody's been here!" exclaimed Chet, whose eye, as usual, was the quicker.

He flung open the door of the kitchen and followed by Phil, clumped in. They looked about them. The remains of a meal were upon the table and the shake-down bed—what was left of it—formerly occupied by Old Jess, was in tumbled disorder.

"Somebody spent a night here," deduced Phil; a remark which really proved no particular keenness, the signs being very evident.

"No folks from this country, or they'd have had sense enough to clean up after 'em," growled Chet, disgustedly. "Didn't even wash their dishes. There were two of 'em; see?"

Phil for the first time noted the two plates, indicating the number who had dined or supped.

"Tramps, maybe," he suggested.

"Don't have tramps away out here. Indians or tourists did it, I reckon."

"Why didn't you lock the door?"

"Dad does lock the office door. But nobody locks doors or windows out in this country. If people want to walk in that's all right; they can, and help themselves to what they need, as long as they don't act mean. But they ought to leave things in as good shape as they found 'em. There's too many folks passing nowadays, though. We'll have to lock everything, same as you do in cities."

Grumbling against the inroads of civilization here, deep among the mesas, seventy-five miles from any railroad, Chet, clumping out, sought beneath the office door-sill for the key there. He found it, and applying it to the lock, opened the door.

"Somebody's been here, too," he said, again disgusted.

For the bed was as tumbled as the shake-down; not merely torn apart as when it was left after having contributed to the roundup a quilt and a blanket. Since then it had been slept in.

Spiked to the table, beside the lamp, with a pin, was a note in pencil:

Charge on account. Will settle in full when we get the girl back. Shooting and kidnaping don't bluff us. Sorry you weren't at home.

TB
∞

"Aw, gee !" deprecated Chet. "It was those two rustlers. Wish some of us *had* been here. Wonder if they took anything? Aw, won't dad be mad, though, when he reads? They signed their TB and Lazy Eight."

Nothing was gone. The rifles (most important) were undisturbed where stowed away beneath the mattress (so as not to over-tempt the casual eye), and not even the clothes in the wardrobe had been molested.

The boys had looked through bunk-house and blacksmith shop without having discovered any damage done there, when Phil's ear caught a hoarse, plaintiff little mew.

"There's old Tom !" he cried. "We forgot *him*."

"Where ?"

"I heard him. Didn't you ?"

"Here, Tom," called Chet.

They re-entered the blacksmith shop. The mew sounded again, faint and hoarse and appealing.

"He's in his nest up under the roof," declared Chet. "Come on outside."

"Here, Tom," called Phil.

"It's up in that corner, somewhere," informed Chet; and standing under the place they both called.

There was a tremendous scratching about, above, and presently Tom's round face peered out, from amidst the eaves, inquiringly.

"Come along down. What's the matter with yuh !" scolded Chet.

Tom yowled querulously, and projecting farther, with movement stiff and slow, began to descend.

"He's been hurt !" ejaculated Phil.

At that moment Tom's hold loosened and down he came with a thud, immediately to gather himself and stagger to the boys' legs, where he rubbed and raucously, rapturously purred.

"Yes, sir; he's been shot ! That's what's the matter with him," exclaimed Chet.

They examined. A ragged gash (now partially healed) had been torn through the fatty portion of his back, over the hind quarters. The ball must narrowly have missed his spine.

"Yes, sir; somebody's shot him !"

"Who do you suppose could have done that ?"

"Poor Tom ! Poor old Tom !"

They petted him. And poor he was, indeed; gaunt with fasting and fever, but evidently upon the road to recovery.

"It wasn't any soft-nose bullet," declared Chet. "That would have ripped the whole end off of him. The lame man shot him with the revolver. That's what; just for meanness !"

The boys growled their indignation. Tom, overjoyed at having sympathy and friends again, would have crawled up into their laps as they crouched down by him,

"Poor Tom. He waited until he recognized our voices, you bet."

Tom hobbled after them, with movement like a rabbit, as they searched here and there. They found no further instances of viciousness on the part of the vandal visitors.

They watered their horses at the creek (it had fallen perceptibly), Tom sticking close down and back, and turned them loose to munch upon hay in the corral. Phil's few things at the ranch were collected, the rifles—Chet's and his father's—and the cartridges were laid out; and these details having been attended to, there was little then to do but to loaf about, petting Tom, and awaiting sunset and supper-time.

Chet did the bulk of the cooking; to cook was a range accomplishment not yet acquired by Phil; but Chet could "build" as good bread (biscuit) as could Old Jess or Pete. With bread, bacon, fried potatoes and coffee the boys fared liberally—Tom dividing his time between the table and the hot stove.

He certainly was glad to have the opportunity.

"We've got to take him up to camp with us," decided Chet. "Can't leave him here, in that shape."

"I should say not. He's liable to starve to death," agreed Phil.

"He *might* pull through. But he's pretty stiff and wobbly." Chet surveyed him judicially. "We'd better take him. If we don't, like as not dad'll send down for him. Dad thinks more of that cat than he does of his best hawss."

"How'll we carry him?"

"Oh, put him in a box or sack. I'll carry him, myself."

"Wish those rustlers would turn up here to-night, again," voiced Chet, after their dishes were all washed. Perhaps the extra accumulation aided in stirring his wrath. "We'd give 'em what they gave Tom."

"That's right," concurred Phil, boldly.

But although sleeping together upon the office bed, each with an ear hopefully open and both with a knowledge that the three rifles were at hand ready for action, they passed a peaceful night. And so did Tom, luxurious behind the kitchen stove.

It really was a question whether in his stiffened condition he could regain his nest in the blacksmith shop roof, and whether once there he might not be too weak to get out again to forage.

So they tucked him into a large peach-basket which they were lucky enough to find, tied a piece of sack-ing over it, and fairly well laden—Phil sitting between two of the rifles, his possessions fastened to the saddle, behind—Chet carrying Tom and basket—after breakfast they set out.

Once more the Bar B ranch was left to itself and to casual guests; this time even the cat had deserted!

The boys jogged on, retracing their route of the day before. Tom, confined in the basket resting upon the saddle and against Chet's stomach, emitted an occasional melancholy yowl as the motion of the horse slightly racked him.

They had been traveling for about two hours, when Chet suddenly declared:

"There's a bear!"

"Where?" Phil was startled.

"On the side of the hill, across this gulch."

Phil searched.

"Big one?"

"No. Little one. See it?"

"It's a badger, isn't it?"

"No. It's a bear, only half grown. Let's go over."

Chet turned Thunder down off the ridge. Phil followed—but dubiously.

"Supposing its mother is around," he ventured.

"Aw, we can get away. She wouldn't chase us and leave her cub. But I don't believe she's very near. He's big enough to take care of himself."

As they rode up that opposite slope the bear (a fat, dumpling chap, half-grown as Chet had claimed and much larger than any badger) who had been busily engaged in rooting and pawing among the rocks and grass tufts, sensed their approach. He sat up on his hams like a begging dog, and gazed. Gray Jack snorted; so did Thunder. With pricked ears and staring eyes they advanced only under protest.

Phil had nervously drawn his carbine from its sheath.

"Shall I shoot?" he asked.

"Naw!" rebuked Chet, the cowboy in him uppermost. "We'll rope him and take him to camp. We'll have him for a pet. Don't you shoot."

The bear, ludicrously sitting erect and with very babyish motions waving its two paws at them, was so

utterly inoffensive and juvenile and roly-poly that Phil scarcely would have had the heart to shoot, anyway.

"He's a young brown bear," averred Chet. "Here; you take Tom. I'll rope him. I'm not afraid. Then you can drive him and I'll lead, and we'll fetch him in and show him to Haney. Haney roped a bigger bear than this, once. A full-grown one, too, almost."

Nothing loth Phil slipped the carbine back into its scabbard and took Tom and basket. The horses were dancing so, that the transfer was not easy ("Whoa-oa, Jack!" "What's the matter with yuh, Thunder!"), but it finally was consummated. Tom mechanically yowled.

The cub had been interested watching proceedings; pivoted there upon his haunches, with solemn but also quizzical expression, following by twisting his head the gyrations of the horses.

Rope down, Chet circled about, forcing the unwilling Thunder nearer.

"Hurry up," urged Phil. "Or else the old one will be coming!"

"Want to get it over neck and front leg. Then it won't choke him and it won't slip back, either," claimed Chet, cheerfully. "Go on up there, Thunder. What's the matter with yuh!"

Under the repeated spurring Thunder in his circlings sidled a little closer; and from above the bear Chet prepared to cast.

"Don't let him run down past you," he called.

"I won't," bravely responded Phil; although, handi-

capped by Tom's basket and by Gray Jack's continuous performance of side-stepping and plunging, he hardly was capable of attending to runaway bears.

"I got him!" announced Chet. "Oh, the dickens!"

His noose had fallen over the cub's head and both shoulders too; for as it flipped down upon him the youngster had thrown up his two paws like a boy warding off a blow—and had stuck them both through.

Chet sharply tightened the rope, toppling the cub to all fours. At the sensation of the tether around his body the animal deliberately turned upon his back and with his paws around the rope tried to draw it into his mouth. His action was so babyish and so monkey-like as well that both boys laughed.

"Get up!" bade Chet.

"You'll have to bring him along on his back."

"That'll take all the hair off," Chet objected. "Get up on your feet, you! Ride closer to him, Phil, and scare him; can't you?"

But Phil succeeded very poorly. Chet started to apply compulsion, and moving ahead, rope taut, hauled the cub a few yards; skidding it. The cub squealed, in piggy fashion, thus protesting vigorously, still on his back, feet in the air.

Chet halted; and Phil, behind, halted. Other ways and means must be considered.

"Aw, gee! I wish he'd get up," deplored Chet. "Quit your yelling, you baby, yuh!" he scolded. "Nobody's hurting yuh!"

Phil's heart suddenly seemed to skip a beat, taking his breath; then it popped into his throat.

"Chet! Chet!" he cried, at the sound of a guttural roar. "The old bear's coming!"

"Look out! There she is!" And Chet's voice rang excitedly.

Incidents now occurred with great rapidity. At the message of the old bear's roar the cub, taking on a new lease of life, whipped to his feet, and sprawling and floundering tugged madly, the while mingling squeals and whimpers. Up the hill bowled a bear as big as a buffalo (Phil thought), its every jump a thunderous, snarling growl. The horses threw high their heads, trembling and snorting and glaring, on the verge of a bolt.

"Shoot her! Shoot! Shoot!" appealed Chet, frantically. "I can't get loose! I can't get my gun loose, either!"

The lash end of his rope had jammed about the horn, and the straining and plunging of Thunder, who was quite unmanageable, was holding the rifle stock between rope and saddle, as in a vise.

Phil endeavored, one-handed (he had Tom in that pesky basket to retain before him) to draw one of his rifles. Gray Jack, with a leap, almost unseated him in the act. The basket tilted and Tom was in dire peril of being dumped.

"Shoot! Why don't you shoot?" implored Chet, angrily.

"How can I? I can't!" retorted Phil. "I——"

Gray Jack executed a grand demi-volte. Betwixt

his two guns Phil clutched Tom's basket desperately and hung to the saddle with knees and hand. Thunder, braced, half turned, was shrinking and pulling, and Chet's spurs had no effect to move him nor release the tension on the rope.

With a rush and a roar the old bear arrived. Gray Jack wheeled, but by main force Phil wheeled him back again. Chet must not be abandoned.

"Oh, gee!" wailed Chet. "I can't get loose."

His face was crimson. Phil felt that his own must be very white.

The old bear (she was a monster, light brown and burly, bristles standing in a clump between her shoulders, small eyes sparking green, white fangs all exposed) stopped beside her cub, below the horses. She nosed it eagerly, and pawed it toward her. She paused to glare up at the two boys and snarl defiance. She grasped the cub again, to draw it in to her, but anchored by the rope it stuck fast, struggling fruitlessly and still whimpering. This sticking fast seemed to puzzle her. She lifted it completely off the ground, with her stout forearms.

The rope caught her attention; and with a snarl renewed she grabbed it, tugging at it with her teeth like a bull-dog. Irritably she battled it; and astride of it, her cub beneath her body, she tugged and worried.

Phil had been spasmodically working to disengage a hand and a rifle at the same time—yet hold Gray Jack to the vicinity and *not drop Tom*. No, not drop Tom, at all hazards! Chet could only sit and wrestle

to release himself and Thunder from their end of the rope! But now his voice wailed out agonizedly:

"She's pulling us in! Help! Phil! Throw a rope on me! She's pulling us in!"

Thunder was sliding down the hill! The weight and the strength of the old bear as she hauled and worried were bringing horse and rider right on top of her! Furiously Chet spurred. But the footing was loose gravel. And Thunder, half paralyzed, yielded inch by inch.

"Help, can't yuh!" besought Chet. "Throw me your rope." His voice broke. "Going to let me be eaten alive? Can't you shoot, or *anything?*"

Phil certainly was anxious to do *something*; but he was embarrassed by a multiplicity of duties; to hold Tom, to rein Gray Jack, to abstract a rifle, to pluck free his rope coil, to retain his seat. At this crisis, when Chet seemed doomed to be "eaten alive," Thunder pitched forward almost upon his nose. Under the teeth of the old bear the uniting and binding rope had parted.

With a glad snort Thunder, his paralysis snapped like the rope, lunged in flight. Chet as gladly encouraged. Upon Gray Jack, Phil, also glad, followed. Obliquely ascending the slope they raced, bending forward, urging their horses, until at the top they dared to look behind.

The old bear was staring after, but she had not pursued. She fell to nuzzling her cub, which standing, shook itself roundly. Both started back, down the hill, at a lumbering lope, the rope trailing after.



"SHE'S PULLING US IN! THROW A ROPE ON ME!"

Chet jerked his rifle loose and pumped away at them.

"Darn yuh!" he said.

But Thunder, dancing, spoiled his aim. Two of the bullets raised puffs of dust just beyond the bears; the other three were not marked at all.

"Aw, shucks!" And Chet ceased firing.

"Shall we go after them?" proposed Phil; hoping not, but resolved to be game.

"No. What's the use? These hawsses are too scared."

Mother bear and cub had disappeared in the brush at the bottom of the gulch.

"They took my rope, most of it," complained Chet—actually for the moment unmindful of the fact that they did not take him, too. "This hawss was so scared he couldn't pull. He couldn't get any purchase, up hill on that gravel. And that bear was strong. She's a cinnamon. Got me all twisted up. Couldn't use my rifle, or cast off my rope, or tumble off, myself, or *nothing!*"

"Look at Tom."

They laughed. Through an opening in the sack-ing over the basket stuck Tom's round, owlish visage, wide-eyed surveying the world.

"He's wondering what's happened."

"Do you suppose he can smell bear, like a horse?"

"He would if you'd dropped him!"

"I was all tangled up, too," said Phil. "First you wanted me to shoot, and then you wanted me to pass you my rope, and all the time I was trying not to

dump Tom, and to keep Gray Jack from running away, and I couldn't get a gun loose or take down my rope, either."

"That sure was a mix-up," admitted Chet, gravely. "I thought I was bear-meat—and I guess Thunder thought he was. I'd like to have brought that cub into camp, though. He was a dandy."

Even by the time that they reached camp the horses had not quieted; during all the remainder of the route they showed a disposition to shy, at intervals, to snort frequently and to travel fast.

The summer camp was just being settled when the boys rode in. Mr. Simms eyed the basket.

"What you got there?" he asked.

With a lugubrious howl Tom responded, announcing himself.

"Same ol' voice. Sounds familiar laik," commented Haney, lolling near. "Howdy, Tom?"

"What'd you bring that cat for?" demanded Mr. Simms.

"Is it a real cat?" cried Cherry, flying to the scene. "Oh, the poor thing!"

"He's some bunged up, ain't he, Miss," agreed Buster.

While Tom hobbled from friend to friend they all listened to the boys' story of the discoveries at the ranch.

"Never washed up the dishes! Think o' that, will yu!" gasped Buster, scandalized.

"An' slep' in the bawss's baid!" added Haney.

"And shot the cat!" further added Cherry.

Mr. Simms folded the note and tucked it into his vest pocket.

"Well written. Fetched my gun, too, did you, Chet? All right," he said, simply. But his face, as he stooped to stroke the hoarsely purring, very happy Tom, had the same grim, hawklike expression of that time when, upon the hilltop, kneeling, rifle at a ready, with bleeding shoulder he waited for the rustlers to emerge into the open, below.

There was an instant of silence; then the tenseness was relieved by the boys' tale (to Haney's infinite delight) of the bear "mix-up."

"Whoopee!" cheered Haney, fairly rolling and kicking up his heels. "Smith-Jones held on to the cat! That's right, Smith-Jones. Bear can eat Chet but she cain't eat ol' Tom."

"Those big bears can shore pull," declared Buster, solemnly. "I heard o' one once—a grizzly *he* was—that did pull a hawss right in to him, hand over hand, only he got shot up first."

"Bears laik to go fishin' an' ketch a hawss an' boy, I hear tell," averred Haney. "Reckon that ol' she-bear had jes' left her baby out there for bait!"

"How ridiculous!" scoffed Cherry. "But I'm glad they got away."

"Which? Bear or boy?" quizzed Mr. Simms.

"Both."

As evening came, and Buster prepared supper, Phil finally asked:

"Where's Old Jess, and the rest?"

"Jess and Ford have taken the steer-herd to the

other side the mountain. That's the steer range, over there. Hombre's gone along with the horse-herd," explained Mr. Simms.

"Won't I see them again, before I leave, then?" Phil was somewhat dismayed. The company was being cut more and more.

But the cattleman reassured him.

"Shouldn't wonder if you would. That's where we start with the bunch you take along into the Junction with you."

"Oh!" said Phil. "Soon?"

"Well, pretty soon."

"Cain't spare Smith-Jones till we get those rustlers run out," chipped in Haney. "They're *scaired o' him.*"

"Shore," agreed Buster, solemnly.

CHAPTER XXX

SOMETHING HAPPENS TO CHERRY

THE summer camp was a log cabin and a couple of tents among the spruce and pines at the head of a little valley of the high country. On this, the Bar B summer range, the grass was long and uncropped, save by deer and elk, throughout the spring, waiting for the cattle, and the flies were not so bad as lower. Nor did the water fail as soon. The cattle would be kept here until late in the fall, when with the last beef drive they would be drifted over to the winter range. Then the summer range would be given its rest, in turn.

The change from the sage and cedars and gravelly slopes to the spruce and pines and parks of spangled grasses was a distinct relief. The boys spread their beds under the trees, and slept there rather than occupy tent or cabin. The mattress of the dried needles was soft and fragrant.

Down through the valley ran a small brook. This was the same Owl Creek which passed the Bar B ranch, thirty miles north, and below. But the Owl Creek in these its beginnings was not the stream of that lower country; muddy, yellow. It was clear and cold and sparkling, and swarming with mountain trout about the length of one's hand; easily caught with hook and line, a willow pole and a grasshopper.

Yes, a cool, green, shaded, well-watered, very pleasant country it was for cattle and for men. And Phil would have liked to spend the summer here. There were many rides to take, through the mysterious timbered vales; there were bear (if one really *wanted* bear) and later in the season there would be deer-hunting. Fishing was good. All in all the summer camp was a vacation.

Of course the cattle must still be looked after. They must be ridden through and ridden around, so that tab should be kept upon their whereabouts and so that calves should be branded. But it was more of an easy, unhurried riding, for the cattle were waxing lazy and the calves were fewer.

However, Phil's time on the Bar B summer range was limited. Home was calling him. And while Mr. Simms' "pretty soon" in reference to taking out that first bunch of beef was rather indefinite, yet 'twas bound to come.

Now, upon this the third morning after their—Phil's and Chet's—arrival at the summer camp the two boys and Cherry, riding out together, separated where upon the brink of a sunny, grassy park stood a magnificent yellow pine. Cherry stopped. The pine and the neighboring trees were rife with the dark-gray pine-squirrel; the flowers of the park extended clear amidst the serried timber; the shafts of the sun penetrated among the boles; the air was scented with the warm balsam oozing from wood and needles; Mistress Cherry decided that she would ride no further. And with Cherry decision was the act itself.

So she dismounted, to sit and amuse herself while the boys proceeded upon their original purpose of reconnoitering this, the northwest corner of the range. They would pick up Cherry on their return, soon.

"You ride around one way and I'll ride the other," directed Chet.

So they, also, separated, at the opposite edge of the park. Phil's course led to the right, down into a long gulch which, brushy and shaded, curved away like a thoroughfare grown to weeds. He followed this, Medicine Eye treading springily and noiselessly a soft, narrow cattle-trail.

Ahead some old cow was bellowing ceaselessly, as if she was in distress mental or physical. She may either have hung herself up some way in the brush, or simply have lost her calf. At any rate, he and Medicine Eye would presently see, for evidently they were nearing the center of disturbance. More distinct swelled the bellowing; Medicine Eye pricked his ears; and suddenly rounding a little turn of the path, here where the brush opened somewhat, Phil found himself face to face with four mounted Indians. The second in line was hauling along with a rope the bellowing cow.

Startled, Phil stared hard. It seemed to him that he recognized the foremost Indian. The suit of buckskin was missing, but the face looked familiar. He was Charley, Chief Billy's son—wasn't he?

"How," said Phil, with laconic Western greeting, as involuntarily he drew aside to let the short cavalcade pass.

The leading Indian who might have been Charley

barely grunted, in response; the next Indian did not even glance; and the others (young bucks all were the four) likewise rode with non-committal mien, gazing straight to the front.

But this was lost upon Phil, for violently wheeling Medicine Eye he dashed almost at a bound to block the further progress of the file.

"Here! What are you doing with that Bar B cow?" he demanded, impetuously.

The foremost Indian, whom he addressed, surveyed him out of dark visage wooden, emotionless.

"No savvy."

"You're Charley, aren't you?" experimented Phil, ingratiating.

"Uh. No savvy."

"Isn't his name Charley?" appealed Phil, down the line.

The three faces made no answering sign. Phil, a bit nonplussed, sturdily resumed.

"Well, you've got a Bar B cow, anyway," he accused. "What you going to do with it?"

"No savvy," reiterated the leader who so resembled Charley. "No savvy." He waved his hand impatiently for Phil to clear the path again.

But Phil, with Medicine Eye held broadside, did not budge.

"No," he refused. "You've no right to that cow." He pointed. "No wueno. Cow, no wueno." He tapped his chest. "My cow. No yours. Bar B." And he drew with his finger a Bar B in the air. "Let go."

Having exhausted his stock of Mexican-Spanish, elementary English and sign-language he paused, hopeful that they had interpreted.

The two middle Indians laughed, exchanging a comment in guttural tongue. The laugh had something supercilious and covert in it, as if making light of him. Phil's cheek burned. The carbine under his leg gave him boldness—but he judged that he had better not draw it save as a last resort; and even then the odds would be against him. Each Indian, also, had a rifle. So he tried to swallow his wrath. The cow gazed up at him and lowed mournfully, as if recognizing in him her rightful guardian from whom she expected protection.

The rearmost of the Indians came on the trot around into the van. He jostled Phil fiercely, assailing him with a string of grunted language, essaying at the same time to crowd him to one side.

"Puk-a-*chee*!" he scowled, out of avid, pock-marked, angry countenance. "Puk-a-*chee*! *Vamose*!" He was a very ugly Indian.

"Puk-a-*chee* yourself," retorted Phil. "Cow, no wueno; no good. Bar B cow. My cow."

An ominous guttural murmur ran down the short line. It crowded forward. The pock-marked Indian gestured Phil aside imperiously. Objecting to being jostled Medicine Eye laid back his ears, but stood his ground; Phil, also exasperated, put his hand upon the stock of his carbine.

"Better not," cautioned the Charley-appearing Indian, curtly.

Phil was astounded.

"You do speak English, then!"

A smile flitted across the Indian's face, momentarily disclosing perfect teeth; and vanished, leaving that face as stolid as before. But now Phil was positive.

"And you're Charley, too," he declared. "You're the man who gave me this. Remember?"

Bethinking himself he extracted from his pocket the little beaded buckskin sack which he had been carrying all this time, and passed it over.

The effect was magical. The greasy sack, after cursory examination by the first Indian, traveled from hand to hand amid grunted comment. Fingers traced the bead design, as if emphasizing. Heads nodded. Phil found the hostile atmosphere changed to one of respect and almost friendliness. The grasp upon rifles was relaxed. And all because, as seemed to him, of the bead pattern.

"Yes, I remember. I knew you all the time. How do do," said Charley—for Charley it was—returning the sack, and now smiling widely extending his hand to shake.

The three other Indians shook Phil's hand.

"How, how," they grunted.

"Is this your cow?" asked Charley.

"She belongs to the Bar B, the outfit I'm riding for," asserted Phil, stoutly. "That's why I had to interfere."

"All right."

Charley spoke a few words in Ute to his companions. One of them cast off the rope from about the

animal's horns. With a toss of her head she walked away into the brush.

The pock-marked Indian asked a question.

"He wants to know if that other man we saw is a companion of yours," translated Charley.

"Who? A boy, kind of short, with freckled face and blue eyes? The same boy——" Phil stopped. Maybe reference to that first encounter, when the cowboys and the Indians clashed and the pistol was held against Chief Billy's stomach, might not be agreeable.

"No. This was a man with one eye, on a light bay horse with two white feet."

"Oh!" Poignant alarm swept through Phil, as he recalled Cherry alone up there among the timber on the edge of the park. "Thunder!" he muttered. "I've got to go," and he turned Medicine Eye.

"Where you going?"

"Back again. I left somebody, who's waiting."

"I'll ride with you," volunteered Charley, with his friendly smile. He dropped a brief word of Ute to his comrades; and starting his horse fell in beside of Phil. The three other Indians stayed behind, on the trail.

Worried and full of fears, Phil urged Medicine Eye into a brisk trot. He did not know how much he ought to tell Charley, and so decided to tell him nothing. But he asked:

"That man was alone, was he?"

"What man?"

"The man with the one eye."

"Yes."

"Far back?"

"Pretty far."

Phil felt a bit reassured. And yet he would have preferred that there had been *two* men, together.

"Where's your buckskin suit, Charley?" he asked.

"Oh, that one? Sold it. Tourist wanted it."

"Where's the rest of the camp? Is Chief Billy back, too?"

"Yes; all back. We're on our way to our own reservation."

"What were you going to do with that cow?"

"Eat her. Take her close to camp, first, so the women could butcher her."

"But she wasn't your cow," argued Phil. "She was a Bar B cow and she's worth twenty-five or thirty dollars. And she's on the Bar B range."

"This was our country before the whites put us off," retorted Charley, doggedly. "Some the government bought but most it stole; and anyway our treaty rights give us privilege of hunting. But the game laws try to stop us in that. When we need meat what can we do?"

Behind sounded a dull rifle shot. Phil pricked his ears.

"Guess maybe one of the boys has found a deer," quoth Charley.

But in Phil's private opinion that cow had been granted only scant reprieve.

"I was sure it was you, even without your buckskin," proffered Phil. "But you pretended you didn't know me, and couldn't understand English."

"Yes," responded Charley, unabashed. "I didn't want to know you. Sometimes we do that."

"Why?"

He did not answer.

"But the bear-grease sack did the business. What does that beading mean?"

"It's an emblem. I don't know what you call it in English. We call it medicine. It's a medicine emblem."

"A talisman, maybe."

"Maybe. It's a medicine sign. My medicine. My mother made it. You can show it anywhere. All the Southern Utes know it."

Phil examined the beading more closely.

"What does it represent?" he asked.

Again his companion did not answer. While now affable as any American youth in many matters, in others he was Indian reticent. 'Twas difficult for Phil to foretell which phase, the white or the red, would be uppermost, moment to moment.

But they trotted onward in comradely fashion, sometimes side by side, sometimes Phil leading. Arriving at the edge of the grassy, flowery park Phil looked across eagerly, hoping to espy Cherry. He waved his hand, on the chance that she might be seeing him even if he had not been able to pick her out, there among the timber (for she was not in the open); and pointing Medicine Eye for the big pine, now at a gallop he spurred across.

No Cherry was under the giant pine. It was the pine, all right—the self-same giant yellow pine. He

remembered it distinctly—and furthermore, here were the horses' tracks.

He called, his heart in his throat again.

"Whoo-ee! Cher-r-ree-ee!"

No answer.

"Gone?" inquired the Indian, who had kept pace through the park, and now was calmly noting his efforts.

"Yes. It's a girl. That's what I was afraid of. Some man has taken her—perhaps that one-eyed man you saw. He has a partner, too."

Phil was all of a tremble. The Indian dismounted.

"She was here," he said, eying the sod. "Girl's foot—see? Horse stood there. How many horses were with you?"

"Three. Hers, and mine and my partner's. We came in together, from over that direction; and Phil and I rode out right along here, across the park."

"You and he get off?"

"No."

"Some man has been here, afoot. See?" The Indian was scrutinizing the sod, rapidly. Phil dismounted, to help. "See? His feet, her feet." Phil could decipher faint outlines—now and then a heel-mark. "Came in from over there——" and Charley gestured. "Went out over there, maybe. Yes. Carrying girl (he lapsed into a crisp, Indian-like vernacular)—sinks in deeper—going to horse, I bet—uh. See where he grabbed her? Sneaked around the tree. She was asleep; can't tell. Carried her to horse—her horse—put her on, I guess—led her away.

If we follow we'll find he went to his own horse, then, I bet."

Thus, while Phil looked on in bewilderment, Charley read the sod and finally glanced up triumphant.

"Was it a lame man?" demanded Phil, anxiously.

"Didn't notice. But only one man. Want to follow?"

"I sure do." And Phil set his lips determinedly. "He's stolen the girl. He had her before, but we got her. She doesn't belong to him and she doesn't like him. He's a low-down rustler. We shot one of the gang. Which way did he take her? Show me, will you?"

"I'll go along. You never could trail them."

"All right!" accepted Phil, heartily. "That will be fine. We'll catch them sure, now."

He had hoped that Charley would volunteer, but he did not like to ask him.

"I wish we would meet Chet," he added, as they hastily mounted. "He's a fighter, and he's got his rifle, too."

Horseback, eyes scrutinizing the ground before, Charley led off through the trees, riding alongside the combined tracks of man and animal.

"He got on here," he reported. "Come. He's in a hurry. Lame man."

And at a quick fox-trot, Phil behind, the trail was taken up in earnest.

CHAPTER XXXI

PHIL REGAINS HIS WATCH

CHARLEY rode straight along, never faltering, his horse at the quick single-foot amble—a cow-pony trot. The hoof-prints in the soft sod of the timber made a plain trail to follow. Even Phil could have followed it, by himself; although not so rapidly.

The trail ran off among the trees as unswerving as if made with a definite destination in view.

"He's trotting, too. But the back horse doesn't lead well," commented Charley. "We'll catch them all the easier."

"How do you know?"

"What?"

"All that—that they're trotting and the horse won't lead."

Charley grunted "Huh!" in true Indian fashion.

"Because these are trot-tracks. And the led horse digs in with his front feet, hanging back."

"Cherry'll make him hang back all she can," asserted Phil. "She's smart." And a little glow of admiration warmed his heart, bitter with worry and chagrin.

He and Chet ought not to have left her, that way. No. She was as capable of taking care of herself as any girl could be—but they ought not to have taken

her at her word and left her. Would those men beat her, now, he wondered. Oh—! He tried not to think of it.

She would get away, though, if given half a chance. For she was as smart as a whip; her mind concealed a whole lot when she wanted it to. And she never quit when once she was started, until she had arrived at her goal.

“Three horses, now,” informed Charley. “Another came in back there.”

“It’s the two men, then. They’ve joined. Are we catching up with them?”

“No. They travel as fast as we. They’ll hurry at first; later they’ll slacken, maybe. You want to catch ’em, do you?”

“Sure.”

“Fight?”

“If I have to.” Phil hesitated. “But you needn’t. It isn’t your fight. You’re doing enough, to help me find them.”

Charley looked back at him with the characteristic grin which so thoroughly could light up his otherwise opaque countenance. By the readiness of it Phil interpreted that the owner was bent upon seeing him through. No words were necessary.

Several little parks had been encountered, but the trail sedulously kept to the timber, seeming to prefer short circuits under cover to crossing the open. However, the pines and spruces appeared to be thinning out; and presently the two riders emerged upon a rocky ridge, with an undulating slope flowing down,

grassy, sparsely bushed and sparsely timbered, into a great gulch. Opposite and across arose a steeper, barer slant, to culminate in another rocky ridge.

Charley's eyes traveled over the ground beneath him; then swept the expanse before.

"Lost the trail?" queried Phil, anxiously.

The Indian grunted, with emphatic negation.

"They stopped here a minute, too. Guess they aren't sure which way to go. Maybe they hate to cross this open place. First they ride along the ridge—this way——" and he did the same. "That wasn't very long ago; horse's mouth dripping on this stone—see? Hasn't had time to dry. Then all of a sudden they strike down this side lickety-split. Must have got frightened. Expect they saw somebody. Maybe us. No. Cowboys."

With head up and keen hawk-like expression Charley was gazing to the left and beyond where the ridge terminated in a shoulder which, also, flowed away in a long descent. And following that gaze Phil descried two horsemen, obliquing from below and heading leisurely up toward them.

"That can't be them!" he hazarded.

"No. Cowboys. Got on chaps."

Charley started and rode down to meet them; Phil, keeping close to him, suddenly was rejoiced to recognize in the two horsemen Chet and his father.

The two parties met.

"How, Charley," greeted Mr. Simms; his eyes searched both faces curiously.

"Cherry's gone!" exclaimed Phil.

He explained. Mr. Simms listened quietly, but his features set hard and stern. Chet's face was white.

"Dad and I were going back there. He said we'd no business leaving her."

"Never mind about that. The thing to do now is to get her again. Are you on the trail, Charley?"

"Over there." And the Indian indicated by a jerk of his head.

"All right. That's what we want."

The little party crossed the slope until in a few moments Charley had picked up the trail where it cut down. He turned upon it; the others followed. At a smart jolting trot they proceeded. Charley and Mr. Simms spoke together, commenting.

"Fresh, and made at a gallop—eh?"

"Saw you."

"We didn't see them."

"They keep in this little hollow, so you wouldn't."

"Must have seen us when we had a cow down and were looking her over."

Behind, Chet and Phil reproached themselves, to mutual satisfaction.

"I thought I'd get back before. Honest I did," bewailed Chet.

"I went back right away, as soon as I heard about the one-eyed man," declared Phil.

"I suspect by the way they're running their hawsses they've a good notion that somebody's on their trail," was saying Mr. Simms.

Charley grunted his Indian grunt.

"Pretty soon they try to lose us."

"They can't lose us, can they?" asked Phil, alarmed. "Not while we have Charley."

"No," answered Chet. "He's a first-class trailer, for a Ute. Apaches are the best, though. But Charley's been with the Apaches, some. Dad's a pretty fair trailer, himself, for a white man. No white man's as good as an Injun."

"They won't know that we've got an Indian."

"Hope not; unless they're up among those rocks, looking down on us."

Phil scrutinized the rocks, apprehensively. The little party had reached the bottom of the slope and were plunging into the gulch. Opposite was the other slope, now near and plain: a solid stretch of rock masses and boulders, jumbled and heaped, strewn from low to high. They ranged in size, the majority of them, from piano-boxes to small cottages. Among them a hundred men might lie collected in the one spot and never attract the eye. How much easier might two men and a girl!

But the trail swerved from this startling moraine and turned to the right, up the gulch.

"We'll get 'em cornered, soon now, if they keep on," said Mr. Simms. "They can't take their hawsses over these rocks, and this gulch pinches out after a bit. Trail growing fresher, Charley?"

Charley nodded.

"One horse is giving out. Lots of froth—see?"

Mr. Simms twitched his rifle from the scabbard, and with watchful eyes glancing right, left and peering ahead rode carrying it across the horn. The boys

(Phil with an excited thrill at the prospect of close quarters) imitated him. But Charley was occupied with picking the trail which waxed harder and harder to decipher.

The gulch was narrowing, until it was only the dry bed of a mountain torrent that had scoured deep and clean to the rock stratum. Under the hoofs of the horses the rock rang like iron. Boulders encumbered the way. But ever the trail, at times a mere scratch or two in the tough surface underfoot, led on, and Charley the Indian, riding more slowly only, never was at loss.

"Try to get out. No good," he indicated, twice, pointing to the sheer edge or bank, where hoofs had torn the meager soil, inside. "Gave it up."

These efforts somehow reminded Phil of the efforts of rats seeking escape from a barrel. But he felt no pity—no, not so long as they had Cherry.

The gulch, narrower still, split into a double head; a fork diverging to the right, a fork diverging to the left. Charley dismounted and examined on foot. He bent close, studying.

"Horses went up this way," he averred. "But one man went up the other. Better follow the man."

"Why?"

"He'll have the girl. Now they think they fool us, sure. One man goes on with the horses; other man hides behind with the girl. They think if you trail 'em you'll keep on after the horse prints and never notice."

"Don't know we've got an Injun with us, do they,"

remarked Mr. Simms, grimly. "Come on, Chet, Phil, you stay here and hold the hawsses."

Thus Phil found himself relegated to the rear! He could not protest. He had learned that in emergencies some duty falls to this person, some to that; each is important, no matter if apparently trivial, and all must be performed. Consequently, disappointed but saying naught, he obediently held the reins of the four horses, in his hand, while the veteran, Chet and Charley the Indian advanced up the right-hand rocky little wash.

"He won't have gone far carrying that girl," declared Mr. Simms. "If anyone tries to pass you, stop him," he called back, to Phil. And, to his own company, again: "Spread out, boys."

Rifles forward, they rounded a turn in the wash and disappeared.

"If anyone tries to pass you, stop him." These words echoed portentously in Phil's brain. He, too, then, had a responsibility—one aside from simply holding the horses of the more active participants.

His carbine in his left hand, the reins of the four horses gathered in his right, he stood, waiting and listening. A pair of mountain jays screamed harshly as they darted from branch to branch. A red marmot whistled plaintively. The four horses stamped upon the shelf-rock beneath their hoofs and whisked their tails. These were the only sounds. Down upon the wash and the slopes either side poured the generous sun.

But another sound now crept upon Phil's ears. It

was a queer, choking sound—a gurgle and a whine in one. He endeavored to locate it. It seemed to emanate from up the right-hand flank of the wash through which Mr. Simms, Chet and Charlie had advanced. Phil stared, seeking out the source. The whining gurgle, or the gurgling whine, continued. Bobbed into view above a fallen trunk something black; bobbed, and fell back again; bobbed, and fell back again.

Phil cogitated a moment. Then tying Medicine Eye to a projecting root and looping the reins of the three other horses over the adjacent saddle-horns (each animal thereby being connected with each), cocking his carbine he hastily ascended to the log in question.

Cautiously he reconnoitered behind it—and discovered Cherry, lying helpless save that she could make that gurgling whine and raise both feet. She was gurgling and in the act of kicking above the log when he looked in upon her.

Feet and hands were tied; a handkerchief—two handkerchiefs—gagged her. Her eyes gazed up into Phil's imploringly; also indignantly.

Phil uncocked his carbine. Falling to his knees he worked at top speed to release her. He untied the handkerchiefs.

"Wuh!" sputtered Cherry, red in the face, ejecting them violently from her mouth. "The dirty things!"

But Phil had no time to waste upon æsthetics. He cut the ropes that bound feet together, and hands.

"Can you walk?" he demanded.

"Of course I can walk. Didn't you see me waggle my feet over the log?" sputtered Cherry.

She scrambled up.

"We'll have to go right back to the horses, then. Come on. Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The man that had you?"

"I don't know. He went on."

"Which was he?"

"Joe. The lame one."

Panting, they reached the horses.

"They'll catch him. He can't have gone far, can he? How long were you there?"

"Just a little while. He knew you were close behind, and he carried me from the horses—he dragged me part way, but he carried me too; he's awful strong—and tied me (I was gagged anyway) and threw me behind that tree trunk and left me."

"Jiminy, but I'm glad I found you!"

"So am I. But I knew I'd be found. Who else came?"

"Mr. Simms and Chet and Charley Pow-wow. He's a Ute Indian."

"I heard you. I wasn't sure at first, but I thought I'd better attract attention. Did you see my feet, or hear me gurgle?"

"Both. Where——?" and in the midst of his question he was interrupted by an outburst of voices from up the wash.

A shot rang out; another. The wash and the slopes suddenly were filled with savage cries.

"There he goes!"

"Halt!"

"Halt!"

"Look out, Chet!" This was from Mr. Simms.

"Bang!"

"Stop him!"

"Oh, dear!" quavered Cherry, her lips parted, her eyes wide.

There was rapid shuffle of feet, on the shelf-rock bed of the dried stream. Phil resolutely half raised his carbine, in readiness.

"Don't shoot," begged Cherry. "Oh, please don't."

There was a rapid shuffle of feet; apparently behind it and upon either side the voices shouted sharply.

"Phil! Phil!" they cried, in warning.

There was rapid shuffle of feet—a panting and a hoarse breathing, and around the curve lurched into view, running, the man with the limp. He was running hard—leaning forward, dragging his lame foot, hatless, coatless, face streaked with perspiration, in his left hand, by his side, a revolver, long-barreled.

"Oh!" spoke Cherry, piteously.

Phil could feel her cower and shrink; the horses threw up their heads. His carbine sprang to his shoulder.

"Halt!" he called shrilly. "Halt!" He did not want to shoot—no, no; not to shoot point-blank at a human being. But he had Cherry to protect, and the horses to hold.

"Halt!"

The man, running, looked. His upper lip lifted so that beneath his thin black mustache his teeth showed in a snarl; and without slackening his pace he instantly shot from the hip. Yes, his revolver scarcely moved save to point.

Something viciously smote Phil's carbine, driving it from his shoulder; simultaneously, with a bang, it, too, exploded; and in the momentary confusion he thought that he heard other bangs, and shouting anew; he hastily picked himself up from his knees to which he had been whirled.

Cherry was crouching, her face in her two hands, whimpering hysterically. From right and left figures were scrambling down the steep bank. Between them, in the wash, was lying huddled and prone another figure. It was the man with the limp. He was motionless. One of the figures stopped by him, the two others came straight on.

"Are you hurt, boy?" 'Twas Mr. Simms, white and earnest, his voice trembling.

"N-no, sir. No, I don't think so." Phil was not certain. He examined himself. Mr. Simms' eyes were searching him. "No, sir; he didn't hit me, after all, I guess."

"He got your gun. That's what he hit." Chet picked it up. "Gee! Right in the stock, too. Look!"

The heavy bullet from the revolver had struck the walnut stock on the inside, and plowing a way along it had passed over Phil's shoulder.

"Close call," commented Mr. Simms, "We

thought he had you. Phew." And with shaking hand the veteran wiped his brow.

"Is he dead?" queried Phil.

"That's what we call him."

Phil forced himself to ask another question.

"Did—did *I* kill him?"

"You? No. Did you shoot?"

"I thought I did."

"But Charley brought him down. Didn't you, Charley?"

"Yes." Charley approached. "I shot the same time he did," and he jerked his head nonchalantly toward the body. "The boy's gun went off right-away afterward."

"That was when the bullet struck the stock," reasoned Phil, much relieved.

"You can thank Charley that the bullet didn't hit *you*," asserted Mr. Simms. "It was full of intentions, all right, but went a little wild. He wasn't the man to miss, if he'd been let alone. And he wanted to get at these hawsses mighty bad. But think of him drawing gun on a boy! Well, he'll never draw again. Did he hurt you any, girlie?"

"No. Just my feelings," quavered Cherry, regaining her self-possession.

"That's good. We can cure them, I reckon. Where's the other fellow?"

"The one-eyed man?"

"Yes."

"He went up that other way, with the horses."

"Um-m-m. That's what we thought. Well, you

boys can take Cherry and the mounts down a bit. Charley, let's you and I search that fellow."

"Did you shoot at him, Chet?" asked Phil, as they led the four animals.

"No. Dad did, though, and so did Charley. I didn't see him. We got to the place where he had climbed out, and then first thing we know he was running off behind us."

"Did he spoil your gun, Phil?" inquired Cherry. "Let's see. Can't you have a new stock put on?"

"He doesn't want to—do you, Phil!" objected Chet. "Take it home and show it, just the way it is. Wish I had it."

Phil agreed. He would not have renovated the carbine, now, for anything. Its deep scar was invaluable. Few persons could boast of such a weapon—bullet-marked in actual combat!

"How did that man capture you?" demanded Chet, of Cherry.

"He sneaked up on me behind a tree, and when I woke he had grabbed me and had tied a handkerchief in my mouth. Then he took me along, horse-back."

"Were you scared?" pursued Chet.

"Yes, but I knew I'd be rescued. I kept him from going very fast. I pulled my horse in all I could."

"That's what I told Charley you'd do," exclaimed Phil, admiringly. "He could see by the hoof-marks, too."

"Is he a real Indian?"

"Yes, I should say he was."

"How did you meet him?"

Phil suddenly recalled the circumstances.

"Why—I ran right into him and three others. They had a Bar B cow and I made them drop her. That is, the medicine bag he'd given me made them."

"I reckon he's earned a Bar B cow, now," said Chet. "I bet dad'll tell him he can pick one out once in a while, for meat. If it hadn't been for him we'd have followed that other man and the horses. The Utes come through here only twice a year—and sometimes not that. Of course we don't mean *many* cows."

Mr. Simms and Charlie came into view, descending the gulch. They were leading a horse. Charlie carried the long-barreled revolver.

"Oh, goody!" cried Cherry. She clapped her hands. "It's my horse. They've found him."

"We cut across the point, into that other wash," announced Mr. Simms. "This hawss was there, only a couple o' rods or so up. Wouldn't lead, probably."

"No, I told him not to," asserted Cherry.

"This yours, boy?" And Mr. Simms extended a small object.

Phil inspected. 'Twas his watch!

"Where did you find it?" he ejaculated.

"Took it off that fellow. Rather thought it might be yours. Initials P. T. M. on it."

"It's mine. But the man with the one eye had it, Cherry said."

"And he did," concurred Cherry. "But maybe they traded."

"Well, you've got it back now, anyway, and you want to hang onto it," remarked the veteran. "Here's a hawss apiece, too. Don't know but what Cherry'll have to walk, though, and let her hurt feelings ride! We'd better make for camp. Adios, Charley."

"Adios." And Charley shook hands all 'round.

"Ugh!" shuddered Cherry, eying the revolver which dangled in his grasp. "There's that dreadful gun. He was always practicing with it and showing how he could shoot people!"

"That gun belongs to Charley now. He won't shoot anybody with it; will you, Charley?" said the rancher.

Charley grinned, and flushed. He rode the one way; they rode the other, for camp.

"I told him if he wanted to trail that man with the one eye he might," communicated Mr. Simms; "and have all he got out of it. But we'd done enough, ourselves, for this time."

"Is Joe dead?" asked Cherry, anxiously.

"Dead enough, girlie."

She sighed.

"I'm glad," she said, frankly. "He was a bad man; he struck me and he tried to shoot Phil."

"But what I can't figger is why he's been so possessed to get hold of you," responded Mr. Simms. "He never was your father—was he?"

"The idea!" protested Cherry. "I'm not his at all. I know I'm not. I belonged to somebody else before he got me—only I can't quite remember. But some day I *shall* remember," she declared, defiantly.

"All right, honey. But in the meantime, Chet and I'll keep you."

"I'll have to do better than I did this time, then," self-accused Chet, ruefully.

"That one-eyed man isn't so mean. You won't have to watch out for him as you did for the other," comforted Cherry. "Maybe he won't try, now, after this."

CHAPTER XXXII

ADIOS

“ ‘Bury me not on the lone prair-ee
Where the wild coyotes may howl o’er me,
Where the rattlesnake glides to his cottonwood lair,’
But they took no heed to his dying pray’r;
In a narrow grave just six by three
They buried him there on the lone prair-eeeeeeee.”

THUS sang Haney the red-headed Texan as, leather-chapped, broad-hatted, spade upon shoulder, he rode into camp again, and cheerfully dismounted. It was the morning after the affair in the wash; and but three hours before the boys and Cherry had noted Mr. Simms and the Texan ride out, bearing the spade, upon final business with the man with the limp—or what represented the man with the limp. ’Twas a gruesome errand, but it was necessary and not unkindly.

Haney threw down the spade and changed the words of his song, although not the subject. He raised his voice lustily, his freckled face beaming.

“ Then roll the drums slowly,
And play the fife lowly,
Play the dead-march as you carry me on;
Take me to Boot Hill,
And throw the sod over me,
For I’m a pore cowboy and knows I done wrong.”

"Did you—did you bury him?" faltered Cherry.

"Wasn't there," promptly answered Haney, tying his horse.

"Oh," said Cherry, meekly.

Timid in the matter, she failed to interpret Haney's meaning; however, Chet pricked up his ears.

"What wasn't there?"

"The corpse for the buryin'."

"Then you didn't do it?"

"Jes' tol' yuh. Cain't bury somebody when he ain't there to bury." Haney negligently extended himself, his hat over his eyes.

"But, great Cæsar! Where'd he go?" exclaimed Phil.

"Don't know. Looked laik somebody'd come an' got him. Mus' have wanted him more'n we did. Glad of it, myself; don't admire buryin' folks, good or bad. 'Drather punch caows, or rope bears!"

"Then he wasn't dead?" gasped Cherry.

"Kin savvy that, either," declared Haney—using that favorite cowboy corruption of "Quien sabe (who knows)?"

"Where's dad?" queried Chet.

"Comin'."

Chet waited, in a feverish curiosity, shared fully by the other two. Nothing definite could be extracted from the imperturbable Texan, who, for his part, was not excited at all.

"Didn't you find him?" assailed Chet, the moment that his father approached.

"Did not," assured Mr. Simms, gravely.

"But what became of him?" put in Phil. "Wasn't he killed?"

"We certainly thought he was, at the time. He was about as killed a man as I ever saw. But when we got to him this morning he'd plumb gone."

When Mr. Simms and Haney had confidently ridden into the little wash there were marks where the body had lain, blood-stains and all. But the body itself had vanished! Mr. Simms was grimly confident that it could not have walked. Haney ventured the opinion that it was not of a type angelic enough to fly. Someone must have carried it.

"That one-eyed partner of his did the trick," asserted the cattleman.

"Thanks to Mistuh One-Eye, then. Saved us a heap o' trouble," drawled the Texan.

"Y-yes—but maybe he's only saving trouble to give it back to us with compound interest," returned the cattleman. He sighed. "Just as we thought we'd got that worst fellow disposed of, too. I don't like it; I don't like it."

"Cohdin' to all reports, he's daid. Ought to've let Charley scalp him."

"Wish I had," avowed Mr. Simms. "'Spect Charley would, too. His father, the old chief, would, all right."

"But isn't he dead?" appealed Cherry, anxiously.

"Um-m-m—maybe," mused Mr. Simms. "But don't you worry. He'd had plenty to hold him for a long, long while. A man with such a hole in him has no business living, anyway."

"I'm glad I got my watch back," said Phil. "He didn't go off with *that* !"

"Aren't we going to follow him up and see where he went to, dad ?" demanded Chet, hopefully.

"Nope. We're too late for the funeral now." Mr. Simms closed his lips resolutely. He addressed Phil. "Get your things together, boy, whatever you have. We'll ride over to the steer camp. I want to start that bunch o' beef out, first thing in the morning to-morrow. That's your chance to catch your train."

"Aw, dad !" expostulated Chet. "It's right in the middle of things ! Phil wants to stay to the finish."

"He's been in at one finish—or two. We'll try to save the rest until he's back again. But if he means to go home in the next ten days or three weeks he'd better ride in to the Junction with this bunch o' beef. Can't tell what will happen later."

"Yes, I'd better go," assented Phil, reluctantly, gathering his possessions.

"We're going, too, then," declared Cherry.

"Hurry up."

"Good-by, Haney," said Phil. He reached out his hand.

Haney stood politely.

"Good-by, Smith-Jones. Come back 'foh the bears eat us all up."

"I sure will," asserted Phil. "Tell Buster good-by for me, will you ?"

"Yes, suh."

They rode away, the four of them; glancing behind, from the saddle, Phil saw that Haney already was mounting, to resume his daily routine.

The steer camp was a good half-day's ride; and so, after a pleasant travel up hill and down, through timber and park, 'twas toward evening when they at last arrived.

"Hello," greeted Ford.

Old Jess grunted. They both were "at home," where the rude cabin nestled among the quaking aspens of a green draw, above which, by a series of terraces, rose beyond timber-line a mountain, its cresting ridge seamed and blotched with snow.

In a corral were confined twenty-five or thirty cattle.

"There's your gather," said old Jess to Mr. Simms, with a jerk of the head.

Together they walked over to inspect.

"Homeward bound, are you?" remarked Ford, to Phil. He was mixing bread, was Ford—sleeves rolled and chaps not yet doffed. An odd enough cook, and an odd enough Bostonian.

"Yes, sir; it's my chance."

"Well, you can't tell them back East that we didn't give you a lively send-off, in regular 'Wild West' fashion."

"Oh, how did you know?" exclaimed Cherry.

"By mountain wireless." Ford smiled good-naturedly, and wiped the dough from his fingers. "Dick was here just before you came. He'd met Buster, and Buster had told him."

"But you haven't heard all. He disappeared!"

"Who?"

"The killed man! They couldn't bury him!"

"Is that so?" Ford's smile changed to a puzzled frown. "What——?"

"Come on!" yelled Chet, from the corral fence.

"They've got the banded steer!"

Followed by Cherry, Phil joined him.

"See?" and Chet pointed.

"Oh, I think it's a shame!" scolded Cherry.

The banded steer was easily singled out; and there he was, with his lean, rangy frame, his enormous flaring horns, his red hide cleanly circled by the white stripe like a parti-colored sweater, standing somewhat morose and aloof among the common captives.

"How'd they get him?"

"Dick and Ford did it. They roped him and brought him in. He was with a lot of tame cattle. He's lame—see? A bear or lion clawed him."

"Are they going to take him for beef?"

"I guess so."

Here, then, was the monarch of the cow-range; who had been long as free as his remotest ancestors back when the cow-kind was new upon the earth and apart from man's dictation; as free as any deer, to roam, to doze, to fight, to graze, to know the secrets of the sage and of the timber and of all the other wild folk, friends and enemies; to defy the human tyrants, with their futile ropes; here, then, he was, brought to the level of those cattle enslaved, driven, condemned, his pitiable contemporaries.

Keen compassion, which did not require the fillip of Cherry's reiterated "Oh, what a shame!" surged in Phil's heart. The banded steer glared dully about, limped a few paces, and hoarsely bellowed.

Mr. Simms and Old Jess, by the corral gate, seemed to be having a friendly discussion; which terminated by Old Jess hastily waddling away, and returning with Ford, both on horseback. They entered the corral.

"Come along here and hold this gate, boys," ordered Mr. Simms.

They went.

"I know!" suddenly declared Chet, after having watched operations a moment. "They're cutting out the banded steer!"

In and out of the captive bunch weaved Ford and Old Jess; they crowded it to the far side of the corral.

"Open that gate!" yelled Old Jess, abruptly; and he and Ford headed for it, driving between them the banded steer.

Out they passed, at a trot; the boys shoved the gate to again; Ford halted; Old Jess with a shrill whoop slapped the steer upon the flank with his hat-brim, and away they tore, lameness or no lameness, down the draw.

"They're letting him go!" ejaculated Chet.

Old Jess pulled short.

"There!" he shouted after, as the steer galloped clumsily on. "Go back to your range. Yuh ain't wuth the trailin' to market."

"Just the same, he offered me \$25 for him," observed Mr. Simms, dryly.

"Did you take it?" Ford winked slyly at the boys.

"No; nor twenty-five cents!" Mr. Simms smiled, sheepishly. "That steer dies on the range, I reckon," he said. "And——" he added, in tone almost half-defiant, as he turned away, "I'll be sorry when he does!"

"He'd never have let that steer go to the market," laughed Ford. "Not on your life. No more than Jess would. They're three old long-horns together. Fact is, we'd all miss the animal. Dick and I brought him in for fun. He was crippled or we couldn't have done even that."

"I hope I find him when I come back," vouchsafed Phil, wistfully.

"We'll save him for you," promised the ready Cherry. And Chet concurred. "You bet!"

Yes, the "Wild West" was, as Ford had commented, giving its departing guest a good send-off. That evening, in the cabin, Old Jess tossed Phil a snaky coil.

"Take it, if yuh want to," bade Old Jess, curtly.

It was a braided rawhide rope—new.

"Yuh can show it to the people out East and tell 'em a man forty years a puncher made it for yuh," growled Old Jess.

"Tell 'em a reg'lar long-horn made it," supplemented Mr. Simms.

Chet, examining and fingering, gurgled extravagant envy. Phil, even more joyed, could say little; and that was, perhaps, under the circumstances,

enough. Old Jess did not care for lengthy thanks. He had spent many hours over that rope, it was a good rope, and he knew that it would be appreciated.

"Hombre left you this," said Ford, tossing another article, wrapped in a piece of old newspaper—Mexican print. "He was over last night. Thought you'd be here then, he claimed."

"Pshaw! I wanted to see Hombre," deplored Phil, honestly. He undid the package. Within the Mexican newspaper was a pair of spurs inlaid with dimes.

"Oh, say!" exclaimed Phil. "I ought to pay him for these. Did he tell you how much?"

"Not a word. Just keep them. When he sends in a bill you can pay for them then."

"But——" protested Phil, feebly.

"Nada, nada (nothing, nothing)," interrupted Old Jess. "They go along with the rope. That Mexican won't take pay for 'em. I knew what he was doin'."

"Well—some of you thank him for me, will you?" asked Phil, anxiously. "Tell him I'll be back and thank him myself, some day."

"Sure," they replied.

"I'm leaving my saddle and bridle," he continued. "If anybody wants to use them he can." He forced a laugh. "And exercise my string, will you, please? So they won't get too frisky for me."

"We'll tend to your saddle and bridle and string. They'll be ready for you when you're ready for them again," assured Mr. Simms, heartily. "Your job with the Bar B's open for you, anytime."

Phil would have impressed upon them, further, the importance of not letting Cherry be stolen nor Pepper run off again, of saving some of the rustlers for his return, of taking good care of Tom, and other responsibilities which must not suffer through his departure; but Old Jess growled "Bed," and his motion was seconded immediately by everybody acting upon it.

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After the two-day drive of the little bunch of beef Phil now stood, still hot, still dusty, upon the meager depot platform at the Junction, with the train already whistling its approach. He had found his trunk and suit-case; but he had had no time to change his clothes. He could only stuff away his beloved chaps, raw-hide, spurs and other extra belongings, and count upon making his complete toilet at his leisure in the Pullman.

They four—Mr. Simms, Chet, Cherry and he—had brought the drive in; Ford and Old Jess had not been needed and had stayed behind upon the steer range. Mr. Simms had given quick hand-shake and had said, simply: "Well, adios. Come back when you can." He was uptown; he had not come to the station. But Chet and Cherry were here.

"We ought to have Buster, to show him a train," blurted Chet. "There she comes."

He drew back a little; so did Cherry. She had discarded her overalls and was in short skirt again. She grasped Chet nervously by the arm, for with rumble and grinding of wheels, hissing of air and

heat of engine the long heavy train was thundering past—to slacken, to stop.

Phil gripped a hand of each.

"Adios," he said, huskily. "Keep me posted."

"Adios," answered Chet. "You bet I will."

"Good-by," from Cherry. "I'll watch after Tom and Pepper and Gray Jack——"

The conductor was calling, impatiently: "All aboa-oard!" Phil turned and sprang for a Pullman entrance.

"Dis yere's a sleeper. Chaih car on in front," objected the porter, eying him dubiously.

"I know it," retorted Phil, tartly.

From the steps he looked back; he just had time to glimpse Chet's sturdy figure and well-known shaggy chaps, and the wave of the quicker Cherry's hand, when the train started; the porter, boarding, stool in clutch, rudely shoved him back up into the vestibule.

But Phil, when in his seat and chancing to see himself in the narrow mirror between the two windows, could not marvel that the porter had viewed his entrance with suspicion, and that in this well-bred car his presence was being tolerated only until an excuse might be found for putting him out. That roughened, reddened countenance, that ragged shock of hair, that shirt with decidedly negligée collar, these certainly were much at variance with the plush and the polish and the neat people sitting about covertly scrutinizing him.

Yes, he was a cowboy just off the range; that was

evident. So let them look at him; they would witness the real thing, boots to hat. He was a cowboy from the Bar B outfit. Little they knew what a lot he had done and what a lot he could tell. Bears, Indians, rustlers, wild-horses, bucking horses, long hours in the saddle, roundup customs, roping, branding, marking, tarpaulin beds, sage and timber—he was “wised” to all. His faithful leathern chaps were in this very suit-case; so were rawhide rope and inlaid spurs and gauntlet gloves. He owned a Ute medicine bag. This parcel leaning beside him was his rifle, once carried by a rustler, with a bullet gash in its stock! He was leaving behind him, in the Bar B country, which he had ridden, a log ranch among the remote mesas, cowboy friends, including his partner, Chet, a string of “hawsses,” a dead outlaw shot by Pete the roundup cook, another who might be dead and might not, shot by Charley the Indian, a third, with one eye, who was alive, a girl named Cherry whom the outlaws had stolen and who could not remember where she came from, a man who had punched cows forty years and another who never had seen a railroad train and another who was from Boston—all working at the Bar B, a wild long-horn steer whom nobody wanted killed; and oh, much other romance which city people would never guess.

He had left also his saddle and bridle (they, too, had belonged to an outlaw); for he was to go back; aye, he was to go back and be a cowboy again; there with Chet his partner (another boy) to help in finishing those events which they had helped to start.

But just now he was going home, to show himself and his trophies and to relate his adventures. Strong and well and self-reliant (a very different personage from him of the outward trip) was he going home, to his father and mother, to a welcome, to a bed betwixt clean, fresh sheets, to a table set with cloth and napkins and gleaming glass and china, to cream and butter and chicken, to a bath-tub, to a familiar porch and familiar street and familiar, eager voices. He was going home; *home*. Suddenly a great gush of warmth welled in his heart. He was going home—and he was *glad of it!*

THE END

